



THE CHRONICLES OF ADDINGTON PEACE

THE CHRONICLES OF ADDINGTON PEACE

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LONDON AND NEW YORK
HARPER & BROTHERS
45, ALBEMARLE STREET, W.

1905

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I

THE STORY OF AMAROFF
THE POLE

I

THE STORY OF AMAROFF THE POLE

"You may think yourself an artist," wrote my uncle, "but I call you a silly young fool."

I remembered the sentence and the reading of it well enough, though time has not stood idle since that September evening of the year 1892. From the point of view of Bradford, my uncle might be right; but what did he know, I argued, of the higher ideal which I had chosen, preferring the development of my artistic sense to the mere accumulation of money that I could not spend? Where was his joy of life—he who spent his days in the whirr of wheels and the fog of many chimneys? How could it compare with mine in the ancient peace of the eighteenth-century house that lay under the towers that crowned the ancient abbey at Westminster? I looked around me at the delicate tapestries

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that I had brought from Florence to my London rooms ; at the glowing Fragonards—souvenirs of my year of artistic study in Paris ; at the Dresden groups redolent of old Saxony. Was I the fool or my uncle George ? There seemed to me no doubt about it. 'It was plainly Uncle George.

Yet the letter had unsettled me. I opened the swing doors that led to my studio, switched on the light, and stepped from easel to easel, examining my half-finished work with a growing dissatisfaction. Were they indeed merely the daubs of a wealthy amateur ? I loitered back to my sitting-room in a sulky depression, and had picked up an art paper, when there came a tapping at the door, and the grizzled head of old Jacob Hendry came peering in. A perfect servant was old Hendry, once sergeant of infantry, and now a combination of cook, valet, and housemaid, who kept my rooms in spotless order, grilled a steak to a turn, was a fair hand with a needle, and spent his spare time in producing the most inartistic wood carving I have ever seen.

" Well, and what is it ? " I asked him ; for he seemed in some hesitation.

" I beg your pardon, Mr. Phillips, sir," he said, " but there's a young man would like to

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see you. A most respectable young man, sir, as lodges above us on the third floor, but——”

“Go on, Jacob, go on.”

“The fact is, sir, he’s from the Yard.”

“The Yard! What Yard?”

“Scotland Yard, sir, where the detectives come from.”

And where I wish to Heaven they would remain, thought I.

This intrusion was simply insufferable. I had a mind to refuse the man admittance.

“’Is boots is quite clean,” said Jacob, entirely mistaking my hesitation. “’E ’as wiped ’em on the mat. I saw ’im.”

“Oh, show him in.”

“The person, sir, of the name of Inspector Peace,” said Hendry, swinging open the door.

He was a tiny slip of a fellow, of about five and thirty years of age. A stubble of brown hair, a hard, clean-shaven mouth, and a confident chin—such was my impression. He took one quick look at me, and then waited, with his eyes on the carpet and his head a trifle tilted over the right shoulder.

“I fear that I have taken a great liberty, Mr. Phillips,” he said, in a very smooth and civil manner. “But I had an idea that you would help me, and time was of importance.”

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"Well, and what is it?"

"You have many friends amongst the foreign artists here in London. You attend their concerts and sometimes even their little dances. We are near neighbours, you see," he concluded, with a slight bow, that was at once an apology and an explanation.

"I am flattered by the interest you have taken in my movements."

"Two hours ago," he continued cheerfully, "a body was found in a passage off Leman Street, Stepney—a body which we cannot identify. The man was of good position, a sculptor, and, I believe, a Pole. A cab is waiting at the door. It is late, I know, Mr. Phillips; it cannot fail to be a great personal inconvenience; but will you drive down with me and take a look at him?"

"Certainly not."

He saw that I considered his proposal an impertinence, for he hesitated a moment, regarding me with an air of depression.

"It has stopped raining," he said, "and the cab has most comfortable cushions. I noticed a fur coat in the hall which can be slipped on in a moment. May I fetch it for you?"

"You merely waste time, Mr. Peace," I

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told him, "I will have nothing to do with an affair in which I am nowise concerned."

"This sculptor may be an acquaintance of your own," he said gravely; "and while we are arguing, his murderers may escape."

"Murderers?"

"Yes, sir; murderers! The man has been strangled and robbed."

The position was most embarrassing. He asked me to go into a part of London that I had always carefully avoided. It was sufficient to know that filth, immorality, and crime exist without personally inspecting the muck-heap. Yet there he stood, his head on one side, staring at my toes like an inquisitive terrier, and my arguments faded before his stolidity. Why had Hendry ever let him in? I should certainly speak to the old rascal about his——

"Well, Mr. Phillips."

"If I agree to go, will you see to it that I am not again troubled in this matter?" I answered sulkily enough. "For I will not be a witness or a juryman or anything like that, you understand?"

"Certainly. I will see that you are not further molested."

"Then, in the name of common sense, let

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us get it over as quickly as possible," I said, kicking off my slippers and ringing the bell for my boots.

Big Ben was striking eleven as our hansom trotted down the long Embankment with its lights winking on the rushing tide below. Past the great restaurants of pleasure, glowing with shaded lamps from the windows of all their balconies; into the silent city where the tall offices of the day lay like deserted palaces under the moon; over macadam, over clattering asphalte, over greasy wood pavement; so we journeyed till of a sudden we dropped from wealth to destitution, from solitude to babble, from the West to the East. Costers bawling their wares under spouting flares, fringed the sidewalks along which jostled the chattering masses of the poor. The section was largely foreign. The patches of colour in some Italian shawl, the long coats and peaked headgear of some moujik, the clatter of the dialects seemed all the stranger from the sullen London background of mean shops, dingy lodgings, and low beer-houses. For, in the shadows of that underworld of the great metropolis, sodden faces, guttural oaths, dingy rags, the blow that precedes the word, are the manifestations of the native born.

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In a side street the cab drew to a standstill. It was the mortuary, the inspector told me. A young policeman at the door touched his hat, and led the way down a passage to a bare stone chamber. On a slab in the centre the body lay with an elderly man in ill-fitting clothes bending over it. He looked up as we entered, and nodded to the inspector.

"You were quite right, Peace," he said cheerfully; "chloroform first, strangling afterwards."

"They took no risks, Dr. Chapple."

"They made a clean job of it," said the elderly man, looking down at the slab with his thumbs in his waistcoat-pockets. "Never saw neater work since—well, since I was invalided home from India."

"Thugs?"

"Yes; they did it nigh as well as a Thug in regular practice."

The callous brutality of the conversation filled me with disgust. I turned away, leaning against the wall with a feeling of nausea.

"And now, if I may trouble you, Mr. Phillips, will you look at this poor fellow, and see if you can recognize him?" said Peace.

I knew him well enough. The black beard, the thin, hawk nose, the high and noble

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forehead were not easily forgotten. Talman had introduced me to him at the Art Club's Reception in July, whispering that he was a Pole and a neighbour of his—a deuced queer fish, though a clever one. He had exhibited a bust of Nero at the Academy, which attracted much attention.

“And his name?” asked the inspector.

“Amaroff. I believe him to be from Poland; that is about all I know of him.”

“How did you come to meet him?”

I told him of my introduction. Would I, he asked, give him Talman's address? Most certainly—No. 4, Harden Place, off the King's Road, Chelsea. I had no objection whatever to Talman being roused at one in the morning. By all means let the old rascal be turned out of bed and cross-examined. His language would be a revelation to the police—it would, really.

The inspector left me on the doorstep for a few minutes, while he whispered to two shabbily dressed men who lounged out of the darkness, and disappeared with the same lack of ostentation. Then we entered our cab, which had waited, and trotted westward, the very air growing clearer, as it seemed to me, when the underworld of poverty fell away

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behind us. It was some time before I spoke, and then it was to ask for a solution to certain puzzles that had been forming in my brain.

"You said he had been robbed?" I began.

"Yes, Mr. Phillips. They had gone through his pockets with every attention to detail."

"Then how did you know he was a sculptor?"

"He had been called away in a hurry. There was modelling clay in his finger-nails, and a splash of plaster on his right trouser leg. It was quite simple, as you see."

His reply was ingenious, and I liked the inspector the better for it. The man had something more in him than a civil tongue and a pleasing manner.

"Tell me—what else did you learn?"

"That he was murdered in a place with a sanded floor, probably at no great distance from Leman Street, seeing that they carried him there on a coster's barrow."

"I am not a reporter," I said. "I do not want guess-work."

"I shall probably be able to prove my words in twenty-four hours."

"And why not now?"

"There are good reasons."

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"Oh, very well," I said sulkily; and we drove on through the night in silence.

He left me at my door amid polite assurances that I should not again be troubled in the matter. I told him quite frankly that I was very glad to hear it.

I did not sleep more than eight hours that night, and was quite unfitted for work in the morning. I roamed about my studio with nerves on edge. I cursed Peace and all his doings. Even the papers gave me no further information of this exasperating business, being loaded with the preparations for the Czar's reception in Paris, which was due in two days. In the end I sank so far as to send old Jacob up to the inspector's rooms for the latest news; but he had been out since daybreak.

About twelve I wandered off to the club. The sight of Talman was a very present joy to me. He was engaged in denouncing the police to a select circle, choosing as his text that the Englishman's house in his castle. I offered my sincere sympathy when he told me that he had been invaded at one in the morning by inquiring detectives. I suggested that he should write to the *Times* about it. He said he had already done so. Incidentally he

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mentioned that Amaroff's address had been No. 21, Harden Place.

I lunched at the little table by the window; but it was in the smoking-room afterwards that the idea occurred to me. I fought against it for some time, but the temptation increased upon consideration. Finally I yielded, and told the waiter to call a cab. I would myself have a look at the dead man's studio.

I dismissed the hansom at the turning off King's Road, and walked down Harden Place on foot. It was an eddy in the rush of London improvement—a pool of silence in its roaring traffic. There were trees in the little gardens. The golds and browns of the withering leaves peeped and rustled over the old brick walls. Several studios I noticed—it was evidently an artists' quarter—before I stopped in front of No. 21.

The studio—a fair-sized barn of modern brick—fronted on the street. The double doors through which a sculptor's larger work may pass were flanked by a little side door painted a staring and most objectionable green. On the right the roof of a red-tiled shed crept up to long windows under the eaves. The side door stood ajar—a most

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urgent invitation to my curiosity. After all, I argued, a studio remains a place where the strict rules of etiquette may be avoided, even though its owner be dead. And so, without troubling further in the matter, I pushed the door gently open, and walked into a short passage, the further end of which was barred with heavy curtains of faded plush. Beyond them I could hear a whisper of voices. I drew back the edge of a curtain and peeped within.

In the centre of the big room was a tall pedestal upon which was set the bust of Nero, which had won no small measure of fame for poor Amaroff in that year's Academy. Under the proud and merciless features of the Roman Emperor stood Inspector Peace—smoking a cigarette and talking to a big fellow with a thick black beard.

A couple of men kneeling at their feet were replacing a mass of loose papers in the drawers of a roller-top desk that had been pulled some distance from the wall.

I was just about to announce myself, when one of the men knocked over a brass candlestick which stood on the desk, so that it rolled to the further side. With a grunt of annoyance, he stepped leisurely round and dropped

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on his knees to recover it. Once out of sight of his companions, however, he whipped out a square of wax from his pocket, and with extraordinary rapidity took an impression from a key that he had kept concealed in his hand. It was all over in five seconds, and from the shelter the desk gave to him, no one but myself could have been the wiser. He rose, replaced the candlestick, and continued his work.

Whether the fellow had played his companion a trick or not, I had no desire to be caught acting the spy. So, pulling the curtains aside, I walked into the room. They all turned quickly upon me, the black-bearded man staring hard as if attempting to recall my face. But Peace was the first to speak.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Phillips," he said, as if I were a visitor he had expected. "You are just in time to drive me back. Have you a cab waiting?"

"No." I hesitated.

"It's of no consequence. We can find another at the top of the street. And now, Mr. Nicolin," he continued, turning to the big man, who had never taken his eyes off me, "are you quite satisfied, or do you wish your men to make a further search?"

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"No, Mr. Insbector," he answered, with a heavy foreign accent, "we are quite content. Noding more is necessary."

"Shall you be wanting to come again?"

"No—for us it is sufficient. It is for you to continue, Mr. Insbector. You' tink you will catch these men who kill him, hein?"

"We shall try," said Peace, with a modest droop of the eyes.

"Ach—but where can there be certainty in our lives? Come now, my children, let us be going. Alexandre, you have the door-key of the studio; give him to the inspector here."

So it was the door-key, thought I, of which Mr. Alexandre obtained a memento behind the roller-top desk!

Peace gave a polite good-bye to his companions on the step, locked up the little green door, and then started down the street at my side.

"I had no business to come poking my nose into your affairs," I said. "Anything you say I shall thoroughly deserve."

"Don't apologize," he smiled. "I was pleased to see you."

"And why?"

"You can do better things than remain a wealthy dilettante, Mr. Phillips. You are

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too broad in the shoulders, too clear in the head, for living in the world that is dead. Such little incidents as these—they drag you out of the shell you are building about you. That is why I was pleased to see you. I have spoken plainly—are you offended?”

“Oh no,” I said, waving my stick to a passing hansom, though I did not refer again to the topic which I foresaw was likely to become personally offensive to me.

He sat back in his corner of the cab, filling his pipe with dextrous fingers, while I watched him out of the corner of my eye. When it was well alight, he began again on a new subject.

“London’s a queer place,” he said, “though perhaps you have not had the time to find it out. There are foreign colonies, with their own religions and clubs and politics, working their way through life just as if they were in Odessa or Hamburg or Milan. There are refugees—Heaven knows how many, for we do not—that have fled before all the despotisms that succeeded and all the revolutions that failed from Siam to the Argentine. Tolstoi fanatics, dishonest presidents, anarchists, royalists, Armenians, Turks, Carlists, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia—a

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finer collection than even America itself can show. On the Continent—well, we should be running them in, and they would be throwing bombs. But here no one troubles them so long as they pay rent and taxes, and keep their hands out of each other's pockets or from each other's throats. They understand us, too, and stop playing at assassins and conspirators. But once in a while habit is too strong for them, and something happens."

"As it happened to Amaroff?"

"Yes—as it happened to Amaroff."

"It was a political crime?"

"Yes."

"And the reasons?"

"They have the advantage of simplicity. Amaroff was a member of the Russian secret-service, detailed to mix with and observe the Nihilist refugees. The Czar enters Paris in two days, and when the Czar travels the political police of all the capitals are kept on the run. I suppose Amaroff showed an excess of zeal that made his absence from London desirable. Anyway, he was found dead, and the Russians reasonably conclude it is the Nihilists who killed him."

"Who were those men in the studio?"

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"The big fellow was Nicolin, the head of the Russian service over here. I don't know a better man in his profession nor one with fewer scruples. The other two were assistants. They came down to the Yard this morning with a request that they might search the studio for certain private papers which Amaroff had and which belonged to them. So we fixed the appointment into which you have just walked."

"And they finished their search?"

"You heard them say so."

"Exactly; but why, then, did they want an impression of the studio key?"

He turned upon me with a sudden impatience in his eyes.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

I told him of my arrival, and what I had seen from my post behind the curtains of the doorway. He did not speak when I had finished, but sat, puffing at his short pipe, and staring out over the horse's ears. So we arrived at our door.

"If you have further news to-night will you call in before going to bed?" I asked him as we stood on the pavement.

"I cannot promise you that. I have some important inquiries to make in the East

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End this evening, and I do not know when I shall return."

I suppose I looked depressed at his answer; indeed the prospect of a lonely evening in my rooms with such a mystery in course of solution outside, seemed oddly distasteful to me.

"It is a rough district, as you know," he said, watching me; "but would you care to come along?"

"There is nothing I should like better," I answered simply.

"Well—it's against the regulations; but they allow me some license. Be ready at nine, and I will call for you. Wear old clothes, a cap and a scarf round your neck to hide your collar. Is that understood?"

"Yes," I said, and so it was settled between us.

We were punctual in our meeting, and trotted eastward over the roads we had covered on the previous day. When we stopped it was at a narrow rift in a wall of mean dwellings. We dismissed the cab and threaded our way down the alley, which opened out upon a miserable square. The houses that surrounded it had once been of some pretension. In a simpler age merchants

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had doubtless lived there, men who owned the tall ships that had lain in the river near by. But now the porticos had crumbled, the iron railings had bent and rusted, the plaster had fallen in speckled patches from the walls. In the centre a few ancient trees still dragged on a disconsolate existence. It was a silent place where wheeled traffic never came. And when, through an upper window, a woman suddenly poured forth shrill abuse upon a drunken man clinging to the railings, each oath rang loudly in the furtive silence.

As we paused at the mouth of the alley, a tall man, with a drooping yellow moustache, brushed by us; and when we turned into a beer-house at the corner he followed us, standing a little apart in an angle of the bar.

There were half a dozen men and women—of the life wreckage of the great city—sitting on the benches; but before the inspector was served with the drinks he ordered, they had whispered one to another and melted away. As the last one slunk through the door, Peace beckoned to the tall man, who joined us.

“Well, Jackson,” he said, “you can’t hide your light under a bushel in Stepney, that’s certain.”

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"I'm afraid not, sir," he grinned. "Leastways not in Maiden Square."

"Well, have you found the place? Oh, that is all right," for the man had glanced at me with a brief suspicion. "This is Mr. Phillips, who has been of much service to me in our little affair; let me introduce you to Serjeant Jackson, Mr. Phillips."

I shook hands with the serjeant, who said that he would take a glass of beer.

"And the place?" asked Peace, when we had seated ourselves on a corner bench out of earshot of the man behind the bar—a bottle-nosed ruffian, who watched us furtively as he rinsed the dirty glasses.

"That's the address, sir," said the serjeant, handing his superior a crumpled sheet of paper.

"A club, is it?" he said, glancing up in his quick, bird-like way. "And what sort of a club?"

"Foreign, sir. They call themselves social democrats, but our special branch men tell me that a full half of the crowd are anarchists, and such rats as that. I think it must be so, for Nicolin and his Russians have had the place under close observation for weeks. And you know what that means, sir."

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“Yes, I know what that means.”

“Amaroff was not a member, but used to drop in there from time to time. He was very thick with the man who runs the place, Greatman, as he calls himself. They tell me that Greatman sat as a model for some statue he was doing, back in July. It must have been a funny sort of statue, for Greatman’s a weedy little Pole, and drinks like a fish.”

For some time the inspector sat in silence, drawing circles on the floor with the point of the light cane he carried. The bar-tender dropped a glass, swore, and then, with a stare at us, retreated into a little cage he had at the back of his domain. Doubtless the presence of detectives was no incentive to trade in the bars of Maiden Square.

“This Greatman—what more do you know of him?”

“We have had nothing against him before; but all the same, it’s his private room that has the sanded floor.”

The inspector’s prophecy of the previous night came back to me with a sudden remembrance: “Amaroff was murdered in a room with a sanded floor, probably at no great distance from Leaman Street, seeing that they carried him there in a coster’s barrow.” I

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began to understand the morbid significance of the private room in this little foreign club. We were drawing nearer to our game; the scent was growing stronger. Peace leant a little forward, with a twist in his jaw that raised a ripple of muscles under the skin.

"Continue, if you please," he said.

"It's at the rear of the club, and there is a back staircase to a yard behind, where costers store their barrows when not in use. It fits in with what you told us to inquire for, don't it, sir?"

"Yes."

The inspector's stick recommenced its interlacing circles on the floor; and we sat and watched, as if thereby he were disentangling his sordid story. So still were we all that the bar-tender poked his luminous nose from his cage in the hope that we had gone. He withdrew it with remarks on the police force which were distinctly audible, and opposed to the complimentary. Suddenly the inspector turned to me with a motion of half-apology, as if at the neglect of a guest.

"There are times, Mr. Phillips," he said, "when evidence runs in absurd contradictions. Observe the present case, in which you are so good as to interest yourself. We have it

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from the Russian police that Amaroff is their man, and that in their opinion—they being well qualified to judge—he was murdered by Nihilists. We now learn that he was apparently on intimate terms with Nihilists, and we have good reason to believe that he was strangled in one of their clubs. What do you gather from that?”

“They discovered his treachery, and took an excusable revenge,” said I.

“A sound conclusion. And now let us suppose that Amaroff was not a police spy at all; being, in fact, a dangerous Nihilist. What then?”

“Why set yourself such a puzzle?”

“Not for amusement,” he said, with his quiet smile. “And now I propose a little experiment. You must introduce us to this club, Jackson; the door-keeper will know you, and pass us in. Afterwards you will go to the back entrance in the yard you spoke of, and wait. It should be easy to conceal yourself.”

“Yes, sir. Am I to stop Greatman if he comes out?”

“No. Stop nobody. We had better be going.”

The square lay desolate and lonely in the bleak moonlight. We crossed it, and stopped

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at a house in the shadows of the farther side. At our knock a slide flew back, and, in the gush of light, a hairy face examined us curiously.

“Vat is et?” he said.

The serjeant stepped forward and whispered. The man was sufficiently satisfied, for he dropped the slide at once, and the door swung back to admit us; the hairy-faced porter bowing a welcome in polite submission. The inspector led the way up the stairs, and I followed at his heels. The serjeant had disappeared.

It was a broad, low room in which we found ourselves, the rafters of the roof unhidden by the plaster of a ceiling. Round the walls on benches ranged behind tables a dozen men sat smoking and drinking. The chatter of talk faded away as we entered. In silence they stared at us, calmly, judiciously, without fear or curiosity. I could not have imagined a more composed and resolute company. I felt that I carried myself awkwardly, as an impertinent intruder should; but the inspector sauntered across the room to a bar on the further side as calmly as if he were the oldest and most valued member in the club.

A pale-faced man with a stained and yellow beard rose from his seat behind the

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glasses. His eyes were fixed on Peace with a weak, pathetic expression like a dog in pain.

"Good evening, Mr. Greatman," said the inspector. "Can I have a word with you?"

"Yes, sir, if you will kindly step into my private room," he answered in excellent English, opening a hatch in the bar. "This is the way, sir, if you will follow me."

We walked after him down a ~~short~~ passage and stopped before the darkness of an open door. A spurt of a match and the gas jet flared upon a bare chamber, hung with a gaudy paper and furnished with half a dozen wooden chairs set round a deal table in the centre. In place of a carpet, our feet grated upon a smooth sprinkling of that grey sand which may still be found in old-fashioned inns. It was here then, if the detectives were not mistaken, that this crime had found a climax, this sordid murder not thirty hours old.

"If you would like a fire, gentlemen," suggested Greatman, "I can easily fetch some coals."

"Pray do not trouble yourself," said the inspector, politely. "My name is Peace, of the Criminal Investigation Department, and

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I called to inquire if you can tell me anything concerning the murder of the sculptor, Amaroff."

"I know nothing."

"That is strange, seeing that he was strangled in this very room."

"Here?" cried the Pole, with a stare of unbelief changing into sudden terror. "Here—in my room."

"So I believe," said Peace.

The man swayed for an instant, grasping at the back of a chair, and then dropped to the ground, moaning, his face covered with his hands. In that crouching figure before us was written the extremity of despair.

"Come, come, Greatman, pull yourself together," said the inspector, tapping him kindly on the shoulder. "If you are innocent, there is no need to make all this fuss."

"It was Nicolin who lied to me," he cried, looking up with bewildered eyes.

"Very probably," said Peace, "it is a habit with him."

"Yet it was I, miserable that I am, who made the meeting between them. Before Heaven, it was with the innocence of a child. If those my comrades of the club but knew——"

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He hesitated, his eyes searching the room in sudden terror.

"Oblige me by seeing that we have no comrades already at the keyhole, Mr. Phillips," said Peace.

There was no one at the door; no one in the dark passage; and when I returned I found that Peace had lifted the caretaker to a chair, where he sat in a crumpled heap.

"You can trust us," the detective was saying. "Believe me, Greatman, it will be best for yourself that you hide nothing."

And so with many fierce cries and protestations, this poor creature began his story.

It was Nicolin, it seemed, who had discovered that Greatman, the caretaker of the Brutus Club, was one and the same with the forger, Ivan Kroll, of Odessa, who had been wanted by the Russian police for close upon twelve years. But having a shrewd head on his shoulders, Nicolin made no immediate use of his knowledge. For forgery a man might be extradited from England. Once in Russia the charge would be altered to nihilism, and then—Siberia. It was not pleasant for the caretaker of a nihilist club to be at the mercy of a black-bearded spy lounging on the step outside. "It was that which drove

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me to the brandy;" said poor Greatman, alias Kroll.

About the end of August there began, he continued, a duel of wits between the two men, Amaroff and Nicolin, the reasons and causes of which did not, if he might be permitted to say, concern us. Nicolin's career was dependent on his success. For him, failure spelt permanent disgrace. Yet it was Amaroff who was playing with his opponent as a cat with a mouse, confusing and surprising him at every turn, driving him, indeed, when time grew pressing, into desperate measures. At the last he formed a plan, did Nicolin, a scheme worthy of his most cunning brain.

"This, then, he did," ended the poor caretaker. "He came to me—I who had so great love and honour for Amaroff, my friend, I whom he had turned from crime and aided to earn a wage in honesty—he came to me and he says: 'Kroll, in my pocket is a warrant that will send you back to the snow places in the East; do you fear me, my good Kroll?' And I feared him. 'See, now,' he said, 'we desire to see your friend Amaroff for a little talk. We cannot harm him here in this mad country. Contrive a trick, bring him into

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your private room behind the bar. Give us the key of the yard door that we may come secretly to him—and afterwards you will hear no more of Siberia from me. Do you consent ? ’

“ Gentlemen, I believed him, also having fear of the snow places ; and I consented.

“ So Amaroff answered my call, and with some excuse I left him in this room. It was at a time when few members were in the club—about seven of the clock. And that, as I live, is all I have to tell. I waited at my seat behind the bar. I saw nothing, heard nothing—and at last when I went to my room, behold it was empty ! I tried to suspect no wrong—but I did not sleep that night. In the morning I saw in the papers that Amaroff, my friend, was dead, and how he died I could not tell.”

“ So Nicolin won the game,” suggested Peace, softly. “ And there will be no regrettable incident when the Czar enters Paris the day after to-morrow.”

“ Of that I have no knowledge,” said Greatman ; but I saw a sudden resolution shine in his face that seemed to put new heart into the man.

“ Well, Mr. Phillips,” said the inspector,

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turning upon me with a warning quiver of the left eyelid, "it is time we were on the move. If we are to meet Nicolin at the studio by seven to-morrow morning, we must get to bed early."

"Certainly," I said. I was rather out of my depth, but I take myself this credit that I did not show it.

"Then do you search the studio to-morrow?" asked Greatman.

"Yes—it has been arranged."

"But will you not first arrest this Nicolin, this murderer?"

"My dear Mr. Greatman," said the inspector, "you have told us your story, and I thank you for your confidence. But I advise you now to leave things alone. I will see justice done—don't be afraid about that. For the rest, please to keep a silent tongue in your head—it will be safer. There is still Siberia for Ivan Kroll just as there may be dangers from your friends in the club yonder for Julius Greatman, who arranged so indiscreet a meeting in his private room. Good night to you."

The caretaker did not reply, but opening the door, bowed us into the passage that led to the big room. We had not taken half a

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dozen steps when I looked back over my shoulder, expecting to see him behind us. But he had vanished.

"He's gone," I whispered, gripping my companion by the arm.

"I know, I know. Keep quiet."

As we stood there listening, I heard the sudden clatter of boots upon a stairway, and then silence.

"It appears to me that we shall have an interesting evening," said Addington Peace.

A twist in the passage, a turn through a door, and we were rattling down the back stairs and out into a moonlit yard. In the denser darkness under the walls I made out a double row of big barrows, from which there came a subtle aroma in which stale fish predominated. From amongst them a tall shadow arose and came slipping to our side.

"He's off, sir," said the serjeant, for it was he. "Rushed by, shaking his fist and talking to himself like a madman. Where has he gone, do you think?"

"To Amaroff's studio; and we must get there before him. The nearest cab-rank, if you please, Jackson."

We ran through the yard, hustled up the narrow streets, lost ourselves, as far as I was

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concerned, in a maze of alleys, and finally shot out into a roaring thoroughfare, crowded with a strolling population. No cab was in sight. Opposite the lamps of the underground station the inspector stopped us. /

"It would be quicker," he said, with a jerk of the head, and we turned into the booking-office and galloped down the stairs. Luck was with us, and we tumbled into a carriage as the train moved away.

We were not alone, and we journeyed in silence. Station after station slipped by, until at last we were in the south-western district again. My excitement increased as we fled up the stairs of the South Kensington station. Here was a new sensation, keen, virile, natural; here was a race worth the trouble it involved. I did not understand; but I knew that on our speed much depended. Indeed, I could have shouted aloud, but for the influence of those two quiet, unemotional figures that trotted on either hand.

I regretted nothing—an hour of this was worth a year of artistic contemplation.

At the corner we found a hansom, and soon were rattling down the King's Road. When the cab stopped, to the inspector's order, it was not, as I expected, at the corner

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of Harden Place, but a street preceding it. Down this we walked quickly until we came upon a seedy-looking fellow with a red muffler about his neck, leaning against the wall.

I was surprised when we halted in front of him.

"Good evening, Harrison," said the inspector. "Anything to report?"

"They're there, sir. They came about ten minutes ago. Job and Turner are watching the door in Harden Place, and I came here."

"They didn't see any of you?"

"No, sir, I am sure of it."

"You had better join the others in Harden Place. Keep within hearing, and if I whistle, kick in the side door of the studio—it can be done. There is a man who I fancy will have a key to the door that is due in about five minutes. If I have not whistled before he arrives, let him through. You understand?"

"Yes, sir."

The detective faded discreetly into the darkness, while the inspector turned to me.

"There may be complications, Mr. Phillips, and no slight danger. I must ask you to go home."

"I shall do nothing of the sort."

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"Mutiny," he said ; but I could see that he was smiling. "You are rather a fraud, Mr. Phillips—rather a fraud, you know. There is more of a fighter than a diletante^s in you, after all. Come, then—over you go."

A jump, a scramble, and all three of us were over the wall, dropping into a ragged shrubbery of laurel. We groped and stumbled our way through the growth of bushes until we emerged on a grass plot. Then I understood. We were at the back of Amaroff's studio. On the side where we stood was the out-house, its sloping roof reaching up to the long windows under the eaves—the^d upper lights, as sculptors call them. And even as I looked there came through these windows a flicker of light, an eye that winked in the darkness and was gone.

"We crept softly forward until we reached the shadow of the out-house. It was roofed with rough tiles, which came to within seven feet of the ground. Fortunately, they did not project out from the wall of the building.

"You must help us up, Jackson," Peace whispered, "and then go round to the door, which I see at the back there. If they make a bolt that way, blow your whistle. If I whistle, start hammering on the door as if

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you were a dozen men. Now then, take me on your shoulders."

He scrambled to the roof like a cat. Lying flat, he thrust out a hand. A hoist from the sergeant, and I landed beside him. We waited a few moments, and then commenced to work our way up the roof. From its upper angle I found that the greater part of the interior of the studio was within our observation.

The moonlight that drifted through the opposing panes flooded the centre of the studio with soft light, in the midst of which the bust in bronze rose darkly upon its pedestal. A minute, and then the eye of light winked out, flickered, explored the pools of shadow, and finally steadied on the wall as three men moved from the room beneath us, following one by one. A second lantern came into play, and before our eyes commenced a search such as I could have hardly credited, so swift, methodical, and thorough were its methods. The cushions were probed with long pins, the cracks of the bare boards, and the nails that held them in position, were studied each in turn, the plastered walls were sounded inch by inch, the locks of desk and drawer were picked with the ease of mechanical knowledge.

We heard it before the men below, the faint

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patter, patter on the road outside of a runner in desperate haste. The footsteps grew silent, and in the pause there must have come a sound, audible to them though not to us, for the lantern slides shut down like the snapping of teeth, and the men vanished into the gloom. Only the moonlight remained, bathing the Nero in its gentle beams. I glanced at Peace. His expression was one of beatific enjoyment, but his whistle was at his lips.

I could not see the entrance door, so that the struggle was well-nigh over before I knew it was begun. The stranger fought hard, as I judged from the scuffling thuds, yet he raised no cry for help. Then the eyes of the lanterns glowed again, and they led him into the centre of the studio with the glint of steel marking the handcuffs on his wrists. It was Greatman—the fox that had run into the den of the wolves!

“And so, mon ami, you play a double game.”

It was not until he spoke that I realized that I could hear what went forward within. The big ventilators above me were open, and Nicolin—for it was he—did not modulate his voice.

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"It is you that killed him," cried the prisoner, raising his fettered hands. "You that have betrayed me. Murderer and liar that you are."

His frail body shook to the fury that was on him; but the Russian laughed in his black beard, stroking it with his hands.

"I had almost forgotten," he said. "It may be that you have some cause of complaint against me. But now that you are here, you will doubtless be kind enough to save us trouble. Where, my good Kroll, are the bombs hidden?"

"Do you think I shall tell you?"

"Remember, Amaroff is dead. They will not go to Paris now. Do not be foolish. Show me the hiding-place, and no harm shall come to you."

"No."

"Then you will return to Russia. The Odessa forgery will carry you there by English law—but, remember, it is for something more than forgery that you will have to answer when you arrive."

There was a silence, and then Nicolin spoke again—two words.

"Sagalien Island."

"I shall not go there," said the prisoner,

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simply. "I shall not go there—Nicolin the spy, Nicolin the murderer and liar!"

"Then you will achieve a miracle. For, as the Czar rules, before a week is out you will be on the sea, and within a month—stop him, stop him!"

He had sprung from them with a bound like that of a wild beast, and with his fettered hands had gripped the shaft of the bust of Nero, swinging it high above his head. For a part of a second, as a film might seize the photograph, I saw him stand in the moonlight with that cruel face in bronze rocking above his own white face in flesh and blood below; yet, as I remember it, there was neither fear nor anger in his expression. And then, as it were, the shutter clicked, for Peace dealt me so violent a blow that it sent me rolling down the roof into the darkness. And as I tumbled headlong from the edge, the whole air seemed to burst into fragments about me—a mighty concussion that left me, deafened, shaken, bewildered, amongst the broken tiles and falling fragments on the ground below.

* * * * *

I was in my most comfortable chair, with old Jacob washing the cut on my head, and the inspector's nimble fingers twisting a

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bandage before I quite realized that I had escaped that great explosion. Vaguely, as in a dream, I remembered that two men, presumably Peace and the sergeant, had dragged me to my feet, had knotted a handkerchief round my head, had pushed me over the wall, and finally lifted me into a passing cab—all with a mad haste as if it were we who had been the criminals. Anyhow, I was at home, which was of the first importance to me at the moment.

“What blew up, inspector?” I asked faintly.

“The dynamite hidden in the bust—but don’t ask questions.”

“Oh, I’m all right,” I told him. “Do explain things.”

“I’ll call to-morrow, and——”

“No, tell me now, or I shall not sleep a wink.”

He looked at me a moment, with his head cocked on one side after his quaint fashion.

“Very well,” he said at last. “I’ll talk, if you’ll promise to keep quiet.”

. I promised, and he began.

“It’s quite a simple story. Nicolin had got word that an attempt was to be made on the Czar, who is due in Paris the day after to-morrow, and that Amaroff was engineering

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the whole affair ; also the Russian was making no headway, and he knew that his position was at stake if he failed. So he got desperate, and took the game into his own hands. He forced Greatman to fix a rendezvous, brought up his men, and strangled Amaroff in the sanded parlour. It was a smart thing to do, for no one was likely to suspect them, especially as he gave out that Amaroff was one of his own officers."

"But how did you locate the place where the murder occurred?" I asked him feebly.

"It was raining last night — do you remember?"

"Yes."

"When I first arrived at the mortuary, I went over Amaroff's clothing. On the soles of his boots was a patch of dry sand. Therefore he could not have walked through the wet streets to the spot where he was found. Also the sand must have been on the floor where he last stood. On the back of his coat was a slimy smear mixed with the scales of mackerel. If my first proposition was correct, he must have been carried from the place with the sanded floor ; and the suggestion was that a fish-barrow had been used, a fish-barrow such as you may see the London costers pushing

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before them in their street sales. It was not likely that the men implicated would have risked carrying him further than was necessary. That limited the radius of the search. Indeed, we located the club in under three hours."

"Of course it seems quite easy," I told him. "But when did you first suspect that Nicolin was lying?"

"His search of the studio was simply a blind," he said. "I soon caught on to that. Also in Amaroff's little bedroom stood his luggage ready packed. He was just off on a journey—that was plain. Nicolin had said nothing about a journey, which was in itself suspicious. I knew the Russian was not the bungler he pretended to be, and I admit that I was puzzled. Then you came along and told me of the business with the key. It was plain they were coming back—but why? It was to discover it that I left three men to watch the studio while I kept my appointment with Jackson in Maiden Square. From what I learnt from him it was evident that Greatman was a man who knew something; so I tried a bluff on him. It's quite simple, isn't it?"

"Oh yes," I said; "but how did you know

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Greatman was going to the studio when he ran away?"

"Rather an unnecessary question, Mr. Phillips, isn't it? Consider a minute. Amaroff was a Nihilist; he was playing a big game—which means dynamite with folks of their persuasion. He had been knocked out of the running, but the dynamite remained. And where? In the studio where Nicolin was returning to search for it; where Greatman also would go to recover it if he desired to revenge himself on Nicolin by carrying out his friend's plot himself. Mark you, I do not believe that originally he had any active part in carrying out this assassination. But when he heard how Nicolin had fooled him, he was anxious to get square by risking all and smuggling the bombs to Paris himself. Moreover, Mr. Phillips, I wanted to locate that dynamite. It is not well to have bombs floating about London, ready to the hand of well-bred lunatics. They breed international squabbles in which we, the police, get jumped upon."

"And they were hidden in the bust?"

"A very good place too. With careful packing, they would have got to Paris safe enough. The Nero was a known work of

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art. No one would have suspected it for a moment. Of course I had no idea that the dynamite was stored in the bronze till Greatman grabbed it, and I saw his face. Then I punched you in the chest and rolled after you myself."

"You saved my life anyway," I said gratefully.

"Tut, tut, Mr. Phillips, that's nothing. Another day you may do the same for me."

"If I get a chance," I told him. "But what will be done now?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"I dragged you off to be away before the crowd arrived. There was no point in your being found in the neighbourhood and asked questions at the inquest on what remains of their bodies. I shall report to Scotland Yard, and Scotland Yard will talk to the Foreign Office, and the Foreign Office will make polite representations to St. Petersburg, and everything will be hushed up. After all, there's nobody left to punish and nobody to pity, barring Greatman, who had the makings of a man in him. Amaroff was a romantic murderer, and Nicolin a practical one; but neither of them were at all the sort of people to encourage.

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So I should advise you to keep quiet, Mr. Phillips, and not talk of your adventure. Do you agree? ”

“ Certainly,” I said ; and we shook hands on it.

II

THE TERROR IN THE SNOW

THE TERROR IN THE SNOW

HENDRY, my servant, saw to it that I should not forget Inspector Addington Peace. Shortly after the adventure which I have already narrated, I left London for a round of country visits. And if a paragraph concerning that eminent detective chanced to appear in a newspaper, the substance of it was brought to me with my shaving-water in the morning.

"I see as 'e 'as bin up to 'is games again, sir," was Hendry's usual overture. "My word, but 'e's a sly one, by all accounts," was the customary conclusion.

I believe that Hendry often gained considerable notoriety in the servants' hall by a boasted friendship with Peace. To this I attribute the fact of his being consulted by Mr. Heavitree's butler on the occasion of the burglary that took place while I was staying at Crandon. Hendry's ludicrous fiasco, which nearly resulted in a law-suit for false imprison-

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ment, need not be narrated here, though it was considered a remarkably good joke against me at the time.

Towards the end of December I returned to London for a few days, and on the third night after my arrival I decided to visit the inspector. Hendry had discovered that he was a bachelor, and lived in two little rooms on the third floor. The floors that separated us were let out as offices, so that Peace at the top and I at the bottom had the old house to ourselves after seven o'clock.

The little man was at home, and seemed pleased to see me. With his sparrow-like agility he hopped about, producing glasses and a bottle of whisky. Finally, with our pipes in full blast, we sat facing each other across the fire, and soon dropped into a conversation which to me, at least, was of unusual interest. A very curious knowledge of London and its peoples had Inspector Addington Peace.

An hour quickly slipped by, and when I rose to go I asked him if he would dine with me on my return from Cloudsham in Norfolk, where I was spending Christmas. He would be pleased, he told me ; and then, as he stooped to light a spill in the coals—

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"You stay with the Baron Steen, I suppose?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And why?"

"Why?" I echoed in some surprise.

"You have relatives or other friends?"

"My nearest relative is a sour old uncle in Bradford, who calls me hard names for using the gifts Providence gave me instead of adding up figures in a smoky office. As for friends—well, I am a fairly rich man, Inspector, and, as such, have many friends. What is there against the Baron Steen?"

"Oh, nothing," he said, puffing at his pipe, so that he spoke as from a cloud, mistily.

"I know that he has played a bold game on the Stock Exchange," I continued, "and there may be a few outwitted financiers growing at his heels. But it would be hard to find a more thoughtful host. Yes, I am going to Cloudsham to-morrow."

We shook hands warmly on parting, and as I descended the stairs he leant over the rail, smiling down upon me.

"Remember your dinner engagement," I called up to him. "I shall see you after the New Year."

"Yes, if not before," he said; and I

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seemed to catch the faint echo of a laugh as I turned the corner.

It was on the afternoon of December 24th that I stepped from the train at the little station of Cloudsham. Fresh snow had fallen, and the wind came bitterly over the frozen levels of the fen country. A distant clock was striking four as the carriage passed into the crested entrance-gates and tugged up a rising slope of park land dotted with ragged oaks and storm-bowed spinnies, which showed as black stains upon its snow-clad undulations. At the summit the road bent sharply, and I saw below me the old manor of Cloudsham, beyond which—a sombre plain, losing itself in the evening mists that swathed the horizon—stretched the restless waters of the North Sea.

The house lay in a broad depression, in shape as the hollow of a hand, save only on the seaward side, where the line of cliff bit into it like the grip of a giant's teeth. The grey front looked up, across a slope of grass land, to a semicircle of forest that swept away in dark shadings of fir and oak. From the long oblong of the main buildings were thrust back two wings, flanked on the nearer side by a chapel.

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From the back of the house to the edge of the sea cliffs, a distance of some quarter of a mile, ran an irregular avenue of firs with clipped yew walks and laurel-edged flower gardens on either hand.

A dozen men sweeping the paths and a telegraph boy on a pony mounting the hill towards me showed as black pigmies against the drifts of snow.

My bachelor host was absent when I was ushered into the great central hall where the house-party were met together for their tea. I am by nature shy of strangers, taken in large doses, and it was with relief that I recognized Jack Talman, the grizzled cynic of an Academician, sitting in a corner seat well out of reach of draughts and female conversation.

"Hello, Phillips," he welcomed me. "And what financial gale brings you here?"

"What do you mean?"

"Don't put on frills with me. I've come to paint old Steen's picture, if he will give me the fifteen hundred that I'm asking for it. Lord Tommy Retford yonder is here to unload some of his old furniture—you know Tommy's rooms in Piccadilly, don't you?"

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Furnished by a dealer in Bond Street, and twenty-five per cent. commission to Tommy on everything he can sell out of them. That's Mrs. Talbot Slingsly talking to him. Pretty woman, got into trouble in New York, was cut by all America, and captured Slingsly and London Society at one blow. Scandal never does cross the Atlantic somehow—all the dirty linen gets washed in the herring-pond. That's old Lord Blane by the fire; very respectable, and lends money on the sly. 'Private gentleman will make advances on note of hand'—you know. Fine woman Mrs. Billy Blades—that's she on the sofa. She's been making desperate love to Steen, but no go. The gay old dog's too clever for her. That long chap's her husband. Watch him prowling round, looking to see if he can pouch a silver ash-tray or something, I expect. By Jove, Phillips, but it's as good as a play, ain't it?"

"And this is London Society?" I exclaimed.

"No," he cackled, shaking with vast amusement. "No, man; no. It's the Smart Set, that advertised, criticised, glorious, needy brigade of rogues and vagabonds—the Smart

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Set. Bless 'em all, say I; they're the best of company, but it's as well to lock up your valuables before you become too intimate with them."

I finished off my tea while old Talman sucked at his cigarette in great entertainment.

"You'd like to see the house," he commenced again. "Come along, I'll show you round—I want a walk before dinner."

It was a most interesting ramble. We passed from room to room admiring the carved oak, the splendid pictures, the Sheraton furniture, the cabinets of old china, the armour, and the tapestry. For the manor was filled with the heirlooms of the de Launes, from whom the Baron Steen rented it. And though the present peer, a broken-down old drunkard, was living in a little villa at Eastbourne on eight hundred pounds a year, the family had been a great and glorious one, finding mention on many a page in English history.

At the end of the great dining-room, set in the black-oak wainscot above the fire, was the portrait of a boy. It was a Reynolds, and a worthy effort of that master hand. The lad could have been no more than fifteen years of age, but in his

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eyes was that grave, distracted expression that usually comes with the painful wisdom of later years. In more closely examining the picture, I noticed that a large portion of it at the bottom right-hand corner had been repaired or painted out. I called Talman's attention to this misfortune, asking if he knew the cause.

"They painted out the wolf," he said, "and with good enough reason, too."

"A wolf?" I said.

"If old de Laune were to hear me gossiping about it he'd kick me out of the place—he would, by Jove! But with Steen in possession it's safe enough. Mind you, though, you mustn't mention it to the ladies—on your word, now."

"Yes, yes," I said eagerly; "go on."

"Such things frighten the women," he explained. "Well, it was in this way. Phillip, and he was the sixth earl, was our ambassador at St. Petersburg somewhere about the year 1790. Once when he was out hunting, he shot an old she-wolf that was peering from the mouth of a cave, and inside they found a thriving family of four cubs. One of them was white, an albino, I suspect. He saved it from the dogs and took

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it home. When he came back to Cloudsham the next year, he brought it along with his wife and his boy—an only son. They say it was a great pet at first, but it grew sulky with age, and finally was kept chained in the stables.

“One Christmas Eve, just as dusk was closing in, de Laune was trotting down the drive—he had been hunting at a distant meeting—when he heard a fearful screaming from the lower gardens towards the cliff. He put spurs to his horse, and in two minutes was galloping through the shadows of the fir avenue towards the sea. All of a sudden his horse pulled up dead, threw him, and bolted. When he got to his feet—he wasn’t hurt, luckily—what did he see but the body of his son, lying with his throat torn out, and the white wolf standing over him, the broken chain dangling at its neck.

“They say he was a giant, this Philip de Laune, and of a very wild and passionate temper. Anyway, he went straight for the beast, and, though he was dreadfully mauled, he killed it—Heaven knows how—with his bare hands. That’s why the present branch of the family came by the place. Pretty gruesome, isn’t it?”

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"A strange story," I told him ; "but why must it be kept a secret from the ladies ?"

"Because the beast walks, man. There's not a labourer in Norfolk who would go into the lower gardens on any night of the year, much less on Christmas Eve."

"My good Talman, do you mean to say you believe this ?"

"I don't know—but I wouldn't go into the lower gardens to-night, if I could walk round. Think of it, Phillips, the white shape with the bloody jaws lurking in the shadows ! Ugh—let's go and get a cocktail before——"

"I beg your pardon, sir, but the Baron is looking for you."

He was a tall, hatchet-faced fellow, with that mixture of respect and dignity that marks the well-trained British manservant. Upon the soft pile of the rugs we had not heard his footsteps.

"He asked me to find you, sir," he continued, addressing himself to me with a slight bow. "He is waiting in his room."

As he preceded us thither, Talman whispered that Henderson—meaning thereby our conductor—was Steen's valet, and a very clever fellow by all accounts.

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The Baron, fat, high-coloured, and hearty, welcomed me with an open sincerity of pleasure well calculated to place a guest at his ease. A remarkable old boy was the Baron Steen. He always seemed to carry with him a jovial atmosphere of his own, in which those to whom he spoke were lost and blinded out of their better judgment. He was kind enough to pay me some compliments upon my water-colour work. Whatever else can be brought against him, no one can deny that he was a sound judge of art.

The dinner passed pleasantly enough that night, with free and witty conversation. Our bachelor host was in his most humorous mood, keeping those about him in shouts of laughter. Facing him, at the extremity of the long table, was his secretary, a thin, melancholy youth of about four-and-twenty. My fair neighbour told me that Terry, as he was named, had been intended for the Church, but that his father, having ruined himself on the Stock Exchange, had persuaded the Baron to give him work. He was devoted to his patron, which, she smiled, was not surprising, seeing that he must be well on his way to rebuilding the fortune his father had lost.

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I am not an ardent gambler, and when I do play I admit a preference for games in which brains are of some account. The roulette-table soon bored me, and after I had seen the last of a few pounds, I contented myself by watching the changing fortunes of the rest of the party. Just before eleven the Baron, who had parted with considerable sums of money in perfect good humour, excused himself, and before the rest had settled down to the table again, I slipped away to my bedroom, where a selection of novels and a favourite pipe offered more congenial attractions.

The room was of considerable size and majestically furnished. It was on the first floor at the extremity of the right-hand wing, and looked out over the gardens on the cliff. A branch road from the main drive ran beneath the windows to an entrance at the back of the house.

They had steam heat on the upper floors, and the high temperature of my room had drawn stale and heavy odours from the tapestry on the walls and the ancient hangings that fringed the huge four-post bedstead. It was the atmosphere of an old clothes shop on a July day. I pulled back the curtains,

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opened the window and thrust out my head for a mouthful of fresh air.

It was a quiet, moonless night, lit by the stars that blinked in their thousand constellations. Though the snow lay deep, the air struck mildly. Indeed, if it were freezing, it could not have been by more than two degrees. Upon the edge of the distant cliffs robes of confusing mist curled in veils as thin as moonlight; but in the foreground the yew walks and aisles of ancient laurel showed clearly upon the white carpet. About the central avenue of firs which carved the gardens into two the darkness lay in impenetrable pools of shadow. As I waited, the silence was startled by a bell. It rang the four quarters in a tinkling measure, followed by eleven musical strokes. I knew that the sound must come from the little church that lay to my right; but, though I leant from my window, the angle of the wing in which I was hid the building from me.

I feel that the story which I have now to tell may well turn me into an object for ridicule. I can only describe that which I saw; as for the conclusions at which I arrived there are many more practical people in the world than myself who would have judged

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no differently. At best it was a ghastly business.

I had returned to the dressing-table and was changing my dress-coat for a comfortable smoking-jacket when I heard it—a faint and distant cry, yet a cry which was crowded with such terror that I clung to a chair with my white face and goggling eyes staring back at me from the mirror on the table. Again it sounded, and again; then silence fell like the shutter of a camera. I rushed to the window, peering out into the night.

The great gardens lay sleeping in the dusky shadows. There was nothing to be heard; nothing moved save the curling wreaths of mist that came creeping up over the cliffs like the ghosts of drowned sailors from their burial sands below. Could it have been some trick of the imagination? Could it—and the suggestion which I despised thrust itself upon me—could it bear reference to that grim tragedy that had been played in the old fir avenue so many years ago?

And then I first saw the THING that came towards me.

It was moving up a narrow path, hedged with yew, that led from the gardens and passed to the right of the wing in which I

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stood. The yew had been clipped into walls some five feet high, but the eastern gales had beaten out gaps and ragged indentations in the lines of greenery, so that in my sideways view of it the path itself was here and there exposed. It was through one of these breaches in the walls that I noticed a sign of movement. I waited, straining my eyes. Yes, there it showed again, a something, moving swiftly towards the house with a clumsy rolling stride.

It was never nearer to me than fifty yards, and the stars gave a shifty light. Yet it left me with an impression that it was about four feet in height and of a dull white colour. I remember that its body contrasted plainly with the dark hedges, but melted into uncertainty against a patch of snow. Once it stopped and half raised itself on its hind legs as if listening. Then again it tumbled forward in its shambling, ungainly fashion—now hidden by the yew wall, now thrust into momentary sight by a ragged gap until it disappeared round the angle of the house. Doubtless it would turn to the left, round the old chapel, across the snow-bound park, and so to the woods—where a wolf should be!

I was still staring from the window in the

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blank fear of the unknown, when I heard the swift tap of feet upon the road beneath me. Round the corner of the wing came a man, running with a patter of little strides, while a dozen yards behind him were a pair of less active followers. What they wanted I did not consider; for at that moment the sight of my own kind was joy enough for me. The electric lamps in the room behind me threw a broad golden patch upon the snow, and as the leader reached it he stopped, glancing up at where I stood. The light struck him fairly in the face. It was Addington Peace!

"Did you hear that cry?" he panted; and then, with a sudden nod of recognition: "I see who it is, Mr. Phillips—well, and did you hear it?"

"It came from over there—in the fir avenue," said I, pointing with a trembling finger. "I don't understand it, Inspector; I don't indeed. There was something that came up that yew walk behind you about a minute afterwards. I should have thought it would have passed you."

"No, I saw nothing. What was it like?"

"A sort of a dog," I stammered; for under his steady eye I had not nerve enough to tell him of my private imaginings.

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"A dog—that's curious. Are all the rest of you in bed?"

"No; they're gambling."

"Very good. I see there is a door at the back there. Will you come down and let me in, after I've had a look round the gardens?"

"Certainly."

"If you meet any of your friends, you need not mention that I have arrived. Do you understand?"

I nodded, and he hopped away across the lawn with his two companions at his heels.

I slipped on an overcoat and made my way quietly down the stairs. From the roulette-room, as I passed it, came the chink of money and the murmur of merry voices. They would not disturb us, that was certain. I reached the garden doors in the centre of the main building, turned the key, and walked out into the gloom of a great square porch.

As I have said, the temperature was scarcely below freezing-point, and if I shivered in my fur-lined overcoat it was more from excitement than any great chill in the air. For a good twenty minutes I waited listening and peering into the night. It was not a pleasant time, for my nerves were jangled, and I searched the shadows with timorous

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eyes, half fearing, half expecting, Heaven knows what hideous apparition. It was with a start which set my heart thumping that I saw Peace turn the corner of the right-hand wing and come trotting down the drive towards me. There was something in his aspect that told a story of calamity.

"What is it?" I asked him, as he panted up.

"I want you—come along," he whispered, and started back by the way he had come.

We passed round the right-hand wing, under my bedroom window, and stopped where the yew walk ended. To right and left of the entrance two stone fauns leered upon us under the starlight.

"This thing you call a dog—could you see it as far as this?"

"No; the angle of the wing prevented me."

"You saw it pass in this direction. Are you certain it did not go back the way it came?"

"Yes. I am quite certain."

"Then it must either have turned up the road, in which case I should have met it; or down the road, where you would have seen it as it passed under your windows; or else have

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run straight on. If we take these facts as proved, it must have run straight on."

"That is so."

We had our backs to the laughing fauns. Before us lay a broad triangle of even snow, with the chapel and wing of the house for its sides, and for its base the carriage-drive on which we stood. There was no shrub or tree in any part of it that might conceal a fugitive. Close to the wall of the house ran a path ending in a small side door. The chapel, which was joined to the mansion, had no entrance on the garden side.

"If it entered this triangle and disappeared—for I am certain it was not here when I ran by—we may conclude that it found its way into the house. It had no other method of escape. Kindly stay here, Mr. Phillips. This snow is fortunate, but I wish the sweepers had not been so conscientious about their work on the paths."

He drew a little electric lantern from his coat, touched the spring, and with an eye of light moving before him, turned into the path under the wall. He walked slowly, bending double as he swept the brilliant circle now on the exposed ground, now on the snow ridges to right and left. The sills of the ground-

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floor windows were carefully examined, and when he reached the door he searched the single step before it with minute attention. A curious spectacle he made, this little atom of a man, as he peeped and peered his way like some slow-hunting beast on a cold scent.

It was not until he left the path for the snow-covered grass-plot that I saw him give any sign of success. He dropped on his knees with a little chirrup of satisfaction like the note of a bird. Then he rose again, shaking his head and staring up at the windows above him in a cautious, suspicious manner. Finally he came slowly back to me, with his head on one side, staring at the ground before him.

"You thought it was a dog?" he asked. "Why a dog?"

"It looked to me like a big dog—or a wolf," I told him boldly.

"Whether it be beast or man, or both, I believe the thing that killed him is in the house now."

I jumped back, staring at him with a sudden exclamation.

"Who has been killed?" I stammered out.

"Baron Steen. We found him on the cliffs yonder. He was badly cut about."

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"It's impossible, Inspector," I cried. "He left the roulette-table not a quarter of an hour before you came."

"Ah—he was a cool hand, Mr. Phillips. It was like him to put off bolting till the last minute. The warrant against him for company frauds is in my pocket now. But some one gave the game away to him, for his yacht is lying off the beach there, with a boat from her waiting at the foot of the cliff. But we've no time to lose—come along."

Before the big garden porch the inspector's two companions were waiting. He drew them aside for a minute's whispered conversation before they separated, and disappeared into the night. What had they done with the body? I had not the courage to inquire.

We entered the house, moving very softly. In the hall Peace took me by the arm.

"You're a bit shaken, Mr. Phillips, and I'm not surprised. But I want your assistance badly. Can you pull yourself together and help me to see this through?"

"I'll do what I can."

"Take me up to your room, then."

We were in luck, for we tip-toed up the great stairs and down the long passages without

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meeting a guest or servant. Once in my room, the inspector walked across and pushed the electric bell. Three, four minutes went by before the summons was answered, and then it was by a flushed and disordered footman who bounced into the room and halted, staring open-mouthed from me to my companion.

"Sorry to disturb your dance," said Peace, beaming upon him.

"Beg pardon, sir, but you startled me—yes, we was 'aving a little dance in the servants' 'all; but it's of no consequence, sir."

"A slippery floor, eh, with so much French chalk on it?"

The young man glanced at the powder on his shoes and grinned.

"So you are all dancing in the servants' hall, are you?"

"I believe so, sir, barring Edward, who is waiting on the party, and Mr. Henderson."

"And where is Mr. Henderson?"

"He is the baron's man, sir. I should not presume to inquire where he was. Beg pardon, sir, but are you staying here to-night?"

"This is a friend of mine," I interposed.

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"He will stay the night; but you need not trouble about that now."

"A smart fellow like you can keep his mouth shut," continued the inspector, sweetly. "You wouldn't go shouting all over the house if you were let into a secret—now, would you?"

"Oh no, sir; on my word I wouldn't."

And so Peace told him of the projected arrest, of the murder, and of his own identity. The colour faded from the young man's cheeks, but he stood stiff and silent, never taking his eyes from the little detective's face.

"And what can I do, sir?" he asked, when the tale was over. "He was a good master to us, sir; whatever there was against him, he was good to us. You can trust me to help catch the scoundrel who killed him if I can."

"I see this room is warmed by steam heat. Is that the case with all the bedrooms and passages?"

"Yes, sir. The only open fires are in the reception-rooms. When the baron made the alterations last year, they left the grates for the sake of appearance; but they are never lighted, save on the ground-floor."

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"And in what reception-rooms are there fires at the present moment?"

"The dining-room fire has died out by now," said the young man, ticking off the numbers on his fingers. "But there is one in the big hall, one in the library where the party is playing, one in the little drawing-room, and one in the baron's room."

"And the kitchen?"

"Of course, sir, one in the kitchen and one in the servants' hall."

"That is all. Are you certain?"

"Quite certain, sir."

"Good; and now for the bath-rooms."

"The bath-rooms, sir?"

"Exactly."

"There are two bath-rooms in each wing; some of the gentlemen have tubs in their own rooms besides."

"Now, I think we know where we are," said the inspector, briskly. "No chance of the roulette party breaking up, is there?"

"Oh no, sir; not for another two hours, at least."

"I want you to return, Mr. Phillips, and try your luck at the tables for a spell," he said, with a quick glance at me. "It is now eleven thirty; be back in this room at twelve

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fifteen. I am going to take a walk round the house with our young friend here in the meanwhile. The baron had a secretary, I believe?"

"Yes, a man called Terry."

"Bring him up with you when you come. I shall want a talk with him. Is all quite plain?"

"Yes," I told him; and so we parted.

When I stepped into the roulette-room I stood for a moment blinking at the players like a yokel at a pantomime. The scene was to me something unreal, a clever piece of stage effect, with its flushed and covetous faces, its frocks and its diamonds, its piles of sparkling gold, and the cry of the banker as he twirled the wheel. How could they be doing this with that bloodstained patch on the cliff edge, with that unknown horror slinking through the snow—how could they be doing this if they were not acting a part! An odd figure I must have looked, if there had been any one to notice me. But they were too eager in the game to hear the opening of the door, or to see who went and came. I walked over to the fireplace, lit a cigarette, and watched them, my nerves growing steadier in the merry chatter of tongues. They were all

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there, the men and women of that careless house-party, all there—save one who lay silent wherever they had laid him.

Half an hour had slipped by, until, at last, with an effort, I walked to the table and threw down two sovereigns on the red.

It won, and I laughed at the melancholy omen ; not, perhaps, without an odd note in my voice, for the man over whose shoulder I leaned to gather my winnings glanced up with a startled expression. It was young Terry, the secretary ; the very person I wanted to see.

“ Anything the matter, Mr. Phillips ? ” he asked. “ You’re not looking very well.”

“ Don’t worry about me,” I told him. “ But I want a word with you in private.”

“ Certainly—just one moment.”

He had been winning heavily, and it took him some time to crowd the banknotes into his pockets. A sovereign slipped from his fingers and rolled under the table as he rose ; but he paid no attention to it.

“ I have something to tell you. Can you come up to my room ? ” I asked him.

He hesitated, looking regretfully at the table, where Fortune had been so kind to him.

“ It happens to be rather important,” I said.

He followed me without another word. I

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did not attempt to explain until we had passed up the stairs and through the corridors to my room. He seated himself on the great bed with a shiver of cold, drawing the heavy curtains about his shoulders. And there I told him the story from the beginning to the end, hiding nothing, not even my belief in the supernatural nature of the thing which I had seen.

He never moved, but his face grew so pale and drawn that towards the end it seemed as if it were a powdered mask that stared at me from the shadows of the curtains.

"My God," he cried, and fell back upon the bed in a passion of hysterical tears.

I tried to help him, but he thrust me fiercely away, so I thought it best to let him get over it himself. He was still lying on the thick quilt, sobbing and shivering, when the door opened and Peace stepped into the room. I explained the situation in a hurried whisper; but when I turned again Terry had got to his feet and was watching us, clinging to the bed-post.

"This is Inspector Addington Peace," I told him. "Perhaps you can give him some information?"

"Not to-night," he cried, "don't ask me

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to-night, gentlemen. You cannot tell what this means to me ; to-morrow, perhaps—— ”

He dropped down upon the bed, covering his face with his hands. He seemed a helpless sort of creature, and my heart went out to him in his calamity.

“ A night’s rest is what you want,” I said, patting him on the shoulder. “ Come, let me give you an arm.”

He took it at once, with a grateful glance, and I led him down the corridor, with Peace in sympathetic attendance. Fortunately, his room was in the same wing, so we had not far to go. When we reached it, he thanked us for our care of him. And so we left him, returning to my bedroom in silence, for, indeed, the scene had been a painful one.

“ Peace,” I said, when the door had closed behind us, “ what was the thing I saw in the yew walk ? ”

He had seated himself in an easy-chair, and was polishing the bowl of a well-stained meerschaum pipe, with a silk pocket-handkerchief.

“ I think you already have an explanation,” he answered cheerfully.

“ If it amuses you to sneer at my superstition—— ”

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"You refer to the legend of the de Laune's. I have heard the story before, Mr. Phillips; nor am I surprised that you believed it to be the ghost wolf."

"I did—but now I want you to disprove it."

"On the contrary, all my evidence supports your theory."

I stared at him, with a creeping horror in my blood. I was beginning to be afraid—seriously afraid. Peace leant back in his chair, with his eyes, vacant in expression, fixed on the wall. He seemed rather to be arguing with himself than addressing a listener.

"Baron Steen," he said, "met with his death on an open path between a shallow duck-pond and a little pavilion. He had fought hard for life, had rolled and struggled with his enemy. There were four or five punctured wounds in his throat and neck, from which he had bled profusely. And now for the thing that killed him—whatever it was. It could not have fled down the cliff path, for the boat's crew waiting below had heard the screams, and had come running up by that way. They were with him when we arrived, and assured me they had seen nothing. It

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could not have turned to the right or left, for, though the paths had been swept clean—doubtless by the baron's orders, for he would not desire his way of escape to be easily traced—the snow on either side lay in unbroken levels. It could only have retired by the yew avenue, and it did not break through the hedge. That, again, the snow proved clearly. So, we may take it, that whatever the thing may have been which you saw—it killed Baron Steen; further, it escaped into the house—this, you will remember, we decided in the garden. Let us imagine it was a man—that you were deceived by the uncertain light. His clothes must of necessity have been drenched in blood. He could not have struggled so fiercely with his victim and escaped those fatal signs. Yet, he cannot have burned his clothes, for the fires are downstairs where people were passing. Nor can he have washed them, for neither the bathrooms nor the bedroom basins have been recently used. I have spent some time in searching boxes and wardrobes with no result. Stranger still, as far as my limited information goes, every one in the house can prove an *alibi*—save two.”

“And who are they?” I asked eagerly.

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"Mr. Henderson, the baron's valet—and yourself."

"Inspector Peace——" I began angrily.

"Tut, tut, my dear Mr. Phillips. I was merely stating the facts. Mr. Henderson's case, however, presents an interesting feature, for he has run away."

"Run away," I said. "Then that settles it."

"Not altogether, I'm afraid. I think it is more a matter of theft than murder with Mr. Henderson."

I stared at him in silence as he sat there, with his little hands clasped upon his lap, a picture of irritating composure.

"Peace," I said, struggling to control my voice. "What are you hiding from me? It is something inhuman, unnatural that has done this dreadful thing."

The little detective stretched himself, yawned, and then rose to his feet.

"I have no opinion except that I think you had better get to bed. Don't lock your door, for I may find time for an hour's sleep on your sofa before morning."

* * * * *

The news was out after breakfast—the news that led to mild hysterics and scurrying

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lady's-maids to the packing of boxes, and the chastened sorrow of those gentlemen who owed the baron money. Through all the turmoil of the morning moved the little detective, the most sympathetic of men. It was he who apologized so humbly for the locked doors of the bath-rooms; he who superintended the lighting of fires, and the making of the beds, and the packing of trunks for the station so closely that the housemaids were convinced that he entertained a secret passion for each one of them; it was he who announced Henderson's robbery of the gold plate, following it by information as to the culprit's arrest. The establishment had by this time become convinced that Henderson was the murderer, and breathed relief at the news.

They had brought the body of Baron Steen to the house early in the morning—it had been laid in the garden pavilion on its first discovery.

With death in so strange a form present amongst us, I was disgusted by the noise and bustle, the gossip and chatter amongst the guests of the dead man. I wandered off in search of the one person who had seemed sincerely affected by the news, the young secretary, Maurice Terry. He was nowhere

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to be found. A servant of whom I inquired told me that the secretary had kept to his bed, being greatly unnerved by the tragedy, and I strolled up the stairs again on an errand of consolation. The door was locked, and there came no answer to my continued tapping.

"Terry," I called through the keyhole. "It is I, Phillips; won't you let me in?"

"I have a key that will fit, if you will kindly stand aside," suggested a modest voice.

I rose from my knees to find the inspector at my elbow.

"It would be a gross intrusion," I told him. "If he wishes to be alone with his sorrow, we have no right to disturb him."

"He is seriously ill."

"How did you discover that?"

"By borrowing a gardener's ladder and looking through his window. He is unconscious, or was ten minutes ago."

A skilful twist or two with a bit of wire and the key was pushed from the lock. The duplicate opened the door. Peace walked into the room, and I followed at his heels.

On his bed, fully dressed, lay poor Terry, with a face paler than his pillows. His breath came and went in short, painful gasps. One

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hand strayed continuously about his throat, groping and plucking at his collar with feverish unrest. It was a very painful spectacle.

"I will send for a doctor at once," I whispered, stepping to the bell. But Peace held up a warning hand.

"Come here," he said, "I have something to show you."

With movements as tender as a woman's he unfastened the man's collar and slipped out the stud. Then he paused. The eyes that watched me had turned cold and hard.

"If it is as I suspect, you may be called as a witness. Do you object?"

"Yes; but I shall not leave you on that account."

"Very well," he said, as he opened the shirt and the vest beneath it.

Smeared and patched in dark etching upon the white skin was a broad stain of blood, of dried and clotted blood, the life's blood of a man.

"He is wounded, Peace," I cried. "Poor fellow, he must have nearly bled to death."

"Do not alarm yourself," said the inspector, drily. "It is the blood of Baron Steen."

* * * * *

A week had gone by, and I was sitting alone in my Keble Street rooms, when Peace

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walked in, with a heavy travelling-coat over his arm.

"Thank Heaven, you have come at last," I cried. "How is Maurice Terry?"

"Dead—poor fellow," he said, with an honest sorrow in his voice. "Yet, after all, Mr. Phillips, it was the best that could have happened to him."

"And his story—the causes—the method?" I demanded.

"It has taken some hard work, but the bits of the puzzle are fitted together at last. You wish to hear it, I suppose?"

"According to your promise," I reminded him.

"It is a case of unusual interest," he said. "Though it bears a certain similarity to the Gottstein trial at Kiel in '89."

He paused to light his big pipe, and then sat back in his chair, with his eyes fixed in abstract contemplation.

"I was convinced that the murderer was in the house; and that he had entered by the side door, towards which you had seen him pass. When studying the spot I made a discovery of some importance. Steen had left by the same exit. Also he had reason to fear some person in that wing, for he had turned

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from the path and made a circuit over the grass. I had already noted his broad-toed boots when examining his body—and the footprints in the snow were unmistakable. Who was his enemy in that wing? It was a problem to be solved.

“I discovered no stained clothing, and no signs of its cleansing or destruction. From what information I could gather, all the house party had been in the roulette-room save you yourself; and all the servants had been at the dance save Henderson and a man waiting on the guests. But in the course of my search the footman who accompanied me discovered that a quantity of gold plate was missing. It was reasonable to imagine that Henderson was the thief. Probably the confidential valet had learnt of the Baron’s projected flight and of the warrant for his arrest. It was a moment for judicious robbery, the traces of which would be covered by the confusion of the news. But was Henderson also a murderer? I did not think so. The death of his master was the one thing which would wreck his scheme. In the early morning I interviewed the farmer on whose cart he had driven into Norbridge. He told me that, acting on orders he had received from Henderson, he met that

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person at the corner of the stables at eleven o'clock precisely—five minutes before the murder occurred. That finally eliminated the valet from the list.

“On my return from the farm I examined the gardens again with great minuteness. At the corner of the little pavilion, about fifteen feet from where the body had lain, there was a patch of bloody snow. This puzzled me a good deal, until the solution offered itself that the murderer had tried to wash his hands in the snow, the water of the pond being frozen hard. Yet his clothing would also bear the stain. What had he worn that showed so white to you in the starlight? Could it have been that he wore no clothes at all?

“A naked man! The suggestion was full of possibilities.

“It was fortunate that I had brought assistants to help me in Steen's capture. Their presence gave me a wider scope, for they were both good men. I left them to search the pavilion and laurels for the clothing, which the murderer might have concealed when he realized how fatal was its evidence. As I walked back to the house I began to understand the situation more clearly. The main drive, curving down the slope of the

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park, was in view of a tall man coming up by the yew walk. The murderer might have noticed our approach. What more natural than that he should have bent double as he ran, thus obtaining the cover of the left-hand hedge, which was not more than four to five feet high? Did not this answer to your description of the thing you had seen? It would have been cold work for him. I made a note to be on the look-out for chills.

“For a couple of hours I devoted myself to speeding those guests who caught the eleven-thirty train. I do not think a trunk left for the station of which I have not a complete inventory. Indeed, the baron’s creditors have to thank me for the return of several trifles of value, which were included, accidentally, no doubt, in the ladies’ dressing-bags.

“After the carriages had started I went in search of Terry, and discovered that he had not left his room. Equally to the point, his windows looked down upon the spot where the baron made his *détour* over the grass while escaping. I became interested in this young man. The score was creeping up against him. A ladder from an obliging gardener allowed me to observe him from the window. A visit to the housekeeper gave me a duplicate key

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to his door. What happened in the room you know, Mr. Phillips."

"But, the motive—why did he kill his patron?" I asked him eagerly.

"I doubt if we shall ever learn the truth on that point," he said. "As far as I can make out, Steen was directly responsible for the ruin and disgrace of Terry's father. Probably the son did not fully realize this when the baron, with a pity most unusual in the man, gave him the secretaryship. But of all participation in the flight he was certainly innocent, for he was in bed at the time."

"In bed!" I cried.

"Don't interrupt, if you please. What happened I take to be as follows:—Terry was in bed when the old man tried to creep past his window. Somehow he heard him, and, looking out, understood what was up. Perhaps that rascal Henderson had told him the truth about his father; perhaps Steen had promised him compensation—he had a mother and sister dependent on him—which promise the financier meant to avoid, along with many more serious obligations, by running away. At any rate, passion, revenge, the sense of injustice—call it what you like—took hold of the lad. He caught up the first handy

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weapon; it chanced to be a dagger paper-knife—dangerous things, I hate them—and rushed down a back staircase and through the side door in pursuit of his enemy.

“When that had happened, which happened, the fear that comes to all amateurs in crime took him by the throat. He wiped his hands in the snow; he tore off his sleeping suit—that is how I know he had been in bed—and thrust it, with its terrible evidences of murder, into the thatch of the little pavilion. We found it there a day later. Then he started back to the house as naked as a baby.

“He saw us running down the hill, and made for the side door, bending double behind the hedge. Who were we? Had we noticed him? Believe me, Mr. Phillips, whether he had held the murder righteous or no, it was only the rope he saw dangling before him. Might not the alarm be given at any moment? He dared not wash himself, and the stains had dried upon him. He hurried on his clothes, shivering in the chill that had struck home, and so to the safest place he could find—the roulette-table.”

“It is well that he died,” I said simply.

“It saved the law some trouble,” remarked the inspector, with a grim little nod at the wall.

III

MR. TAUBERY'S DIAMOND

III

MR. TAUBERY'S DIAMOND

"Hi, young fellow! Does Inspector Peace live here?"

He spoke roughly enough, and I returned his stare with an equal irritation. When a man may not indulge in day dreams on his own doorstep, the state of society wants mending. He was a big bully of a fellow, with a red face, a curled, white moustache, and a single eye-glass, through which he regarded me with an air of extreme ill-temper.

"The inspector lodges on the third floor," I told him coldly.

"Do you live here too?"

I had a mind not to answer him, but, after all, it was not worth while making trouble over an impudent question.

"Yes," I said; "I rent the ground-floor and the studio behind. My name is Phillips. I am an artist. For the past four years I

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have studied abroad. If you would like to see my birth-certificate I will go and fetch it for you."

To my surprise, he burst into a shout of laughter, swaying his body from side to side. It was quite a time before he recovered himself.

"Good, lad—good, lad," he chuckled; "Gad! but I deserved it. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Gunton, sir—Colonel Theophilus Gunton—and I'm very pleased to meet you."

He held out his hand, which I shook, without any great degree of enthusiasm.

"Is this Addington Peace at home, do you think?" he continued.

"I don't know," I told him. "I should walk upstairs and find out, if I were you."

"There I recognize the practical head. You know him?"

"Yes."

"Then, we will go together. You can introduce me."

I was offended at the noise and bluster of the man; but he had grabbed my arm, and I didn't want a scene at my own door. I led him up the stairs, his voice growing silent as his lung capacity weakened. The inspector's

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voice cried an invitation to my knock, and I entered, with the colonel puffing at my heels like a locomotive on a stiff incline.

"Sorry to disturb you, Peace," I said; "but this is a gentleman of the name of Gunton, and he appears anxious to make your acquaintance."

The little man rose from his easy-chair, and stood looking at the stranger with an expression of great good-humour.

For myself, I was about to withdraw when the colonel's hand dropped heavily upon my shoulder.

"Don't you go," he said. "A cosmopolitan, a detective, and a man of the world, as I am, form a unique combination. And, by Gad! gentlemen, we shall want all our brains over this affair."

I glanced at Peace, who smiled and nodded. So I stayed.

The colonel kindly consented to take the most comfortable chair, sighed, stretched out his legs, lit a cheroot, and then, without further introduction, plunged into his story.

"Perhaps you have heard of Julius Taubery? No? Well, it's a name as well known throughout India as the Viceroy's. He is the head of one of the richest firms in Calcutta.

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Went out there as a young man, worked well, married well, and ended well in all things, save his constitution, with which he played the very devil. In 1900 he returned and took a fine London house in Portland Place, together with an old hall down in Devonshire. A month ago the doctors ordered him out of England for life. Rough on him, wasn't it, seeing that he had spent two-thirds of his time out of it already? But the south of France is his only chance, they tell him; so, like a wise man, he is selling off his sticks, and settling down at Mentone, without squealing to show how much it hurts him.

"Julius and his wife—she's one of the kindest-hearted women—have been giving some farewell parties to their old friends. They had a lunch to-day, one-thirty sharp, and a lot of people turned up. After the ladies had left us, the talk, as luck would have it, fell on precious stones; and Julius Taubery is a crank on them if there ever was one. His wife wears the finest jewels in London, and the old man is supposed to have many thousand pounds' worth more locked away, which he won't trust even her with the handling.

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“ ‘Gentlemen,’ says he, ‘ I will show you something that may interest you. It is a new purchase of mine, and it happens to be a remarkable stone ! ’

“He pulled a green case from an inside pocket, flipped it open, and there the thing was as big as a walnut. The lights were on, it being dull weather, and the stone blinked and sparkled like the sun on dancing water.

“ ‘ My word, Julius,’ I said. ‘ But that’s a risky bit of stuff to carry about with you.’

“ ‘ It’s going to the bank this afternoon,’ he answered. ‘ So if you want to examine the pretty pebble, gentlemen, this is your last chance.’

“And with that he took it from its case, as proud as a young husband of his first baby, and sent it round the table.

“I was sitting on Julius’ left. Between us was a fat old boy, who was a stranger to me. He took a long stare at the stone, whistling softly between his teeth, before he passed it on. It went from hand to hand, never out of sight, so far as I could notice, until it came to Sir Andrew Carillon, who fancies himself an expert on gems. They say that when Lady Carillon is in the stalls, the play is finished to the women sitting

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behind her, for they can't keep their eyes off her pearls. Sir Andrew pulled out a magnifying glass, and began examining the diamond.

“‘I congratulate you, Taubery,’ he said, after about a minute. ‘You have acquired a historical stone!’

“Old Julius leant back, with a smile half-way round his head, but he didn't say a word.

“‘This stone,’ said Sir Andrew, in the heavy, pompous way that he has, tapping it with his magnifying glass to attract attention, ‘this stone is the celebrated Hyderapore diamond, to which first historical reference is made in the year 1584. It was captured by the Rajah of Hyderapore from a ruling chief in the Deccan after a battle, in which four thousand men lost their lives. In 1680 it was stolen from the Rajah's palace by a Spaniard, who escaped to Bombay, where he was robbed and murdered. The stone disappeared for about sixty years.

“‘It subsequently came into the possession of one of the East India Company's agents, who was stabbed to death in his bungalow near Calcutta about 1760. The diamond, which is held to have inspired the attack, was saved from the robbers by

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the appearance of his guests and servants. The widow brought it to Europe and sold it to the Duc d'Alembert, who lost his diamond and incidentally his life in the French Revolution. It turned up again at the Court of Napoleon III., being then in the possession of Henri Marvin, the well-known financier. Until to-day I thought it was still in his family.

"It is one of the very few large diamonds that is absolutely without flaw, and its value in the open market to-day would be approaching thirty thousand pounds. Any one who takes an interest in historical stones might be tempted to give even a higher price; for there has been enough blood spilt over it, gentlemen, to fill the bath of its fortunate possessor.'

"He laid down the diamond on the table and looked at his host with a malicious grin. But all connoisseurs are alike; they are as covetous of each other's pet treasures as so many cats.

"All the time that Sir Andrew had been speaking, the fat fellow next to me had been snorting and swelling until, 'pon my soul, I thought he was in for a stroke of apoplexy. I am the best-tempered of men, but I have

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my limits, and the old grampus was one of them.

“‘Are you in pain, sir?’ I asked him.

“‘Yes, I am, sir,’ he said, in such a high, squeaky voice that all the table could hear him. ‘I object to listening to the definitions of so-called experts, who cannot tell a diamond from a glass marble. Experts? Blumbugs, that’s what I call them!’

“‘Do you refer to me, Professor Endicott?’ began Sir Andrew, leaning forward, with a very red face.

“‘Most certainly I do.’

“‘Then I must ask you for an explanation or an immediate apology.’

“‘A man who can make so ludicrous an error deserves neither the one nor the other,’ cried the professor, in great excitement. ‘That stone has been in the possession of the Princes of Pavaloff for three hundred years. Prince Peter, the present head of the family, kindly allowed me to examine it when I was at Moscow in 1894. I was not aware that he had sold it. I trust, Mr. Taubery, that you obtained it from a respectable source; if not, I should be no true friend did I hide from you my belief that it has been stolen.’

“If a man had said such a deucedly in-

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sulting thing to me I should have knocked him down there and then. I would, 'pon my soul, without thinking more about it. But Julius lay back in his chair, smiling all over his face. I suppose those collectors get accustomed to each other's little ways; they're a queer lot, anyway.

“‘You can be quite easy on that point, Professor Endicott,’ he said. ‘Prince Peter was, unfortunately, involved in the late Dolorouski conspiracy, but had time to slip across the Russian frontier before the police could arrest him. I bought the diamond from his agent in Paris.’

“‘You interest me deeply, Mr. Taubery,’ struck in Sir Andrew, speaking very softly, though we could all see he was in a devil of a rage. ‘Even I was not unaware of the existence of the Pavloff diamond. If my memory does not fail me, it is slightly disfigured by a flaw on the eighth facet?’

“‘Certainly, Sir Andrew,’ said our host; ‘if you examine the stone you will see that such is the case.’

“‘There is no such blemish on the diamond I have before me. Therefore I humbly suggest that you have been deceived by this Parisian agent as to its origin.’

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“Professor Endicott climbed to his feet, with a grunt of dissatisfaction, and leant over the table, thrusting out his podgy fist to receive the jewel. He remained standing, with his body swayed forward, so that the electric lights above the silver centre-piece might shine the brighter upon what he held. Presently he dropped his hands to his sides and stood staring about him like a ploughman lost in Piccadilly.

“‘This is not the stone I examined five minutes ago,’ he stuttered.

“‘Nonsense,’ said old Julius, with a shadow of fear in his eyes. ‘Nonsense, Endicott; look again.’

“‘Can it be that two such famous experts have made a mistake?’ sneered Sir Andrew. ‘Can it be that a humble amateur like myself is right and that they are wrong? As I told you, gentlemen, the Hyderapore diamond——’

“‘Hyderapore diamond be d—d!’ squealed the fat man. ‘This thing is a fake, a clumsy imitation. Taubery, you have been robbed!’

“We were all on our feet in an instant amid a clamour of tongues. But there was one man amongst us that kept his head; one man who realized that his honour was in peril; that immediate action was necessary.

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His name—if I am not too egotistical—is Theophilus Gunton.

“Fortunately, I have a voice of some power, and a manner that, when my feelings are strongly moved, is perhaps, not unimpressive. I commanded and obtained silence. I begged them to resume their seats; they obeyed.

“‘Julius Taubery,’ I said, ‘has your diamond disappeared?’

“He answered that it had, looking at the imitation stone, which they had returned to him, in a silly, scared way.

“‘Julius Taubery,’ I continued, ‘we, your guests, lie under a stigma, an imputation. We cannot leave the house under such circumstances. Some one must have brought the imitation stone with him for a purpose that it is needless to define. The real jewel must be in his pocket at this moment. Let us, therefore, be searched.’

“They all sat silent as mice under my eye, save the Professor, who grunted as if in dissent.

“‘Do I understand that you object to my plan, sir?’ I asked him. ‘Do you refuse to be searched? And if so, may I ask why?’

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“He gave me an angry look, but he had not the courage to contest the point.

“‘Then, I may take it that we are all agreed. Taubery, you have a library upon this floor. As I passed the door before lunch I noticed that there was an excellent fire there. Professor Endicott and myself will retire to that room. I will search the Professor; the Professor shall search me. After that the rest of the guests will come, one by one, into the room, where we will search them in turn. Let us have no delay. Professor Endicott, I am very much at your service.’

“I went through that party, gentlemen, as our Transatlantic cousins would express it, with a fine-tooth comb. And I feel it my duty to say that not one of them raised the smallest objection to the severity of my methods. They were like lambs, gentlemen, they were, by thunder! But I obtained no result. The Taubery diamond had disappeared.

“Poor old Julius was quite broken down about it. He placed the whole matter in my hands. On my way to Scotland Yard I remembered what an old friend of mine had told me about you. ‘If you are ever in a hole, Gunton,’ he said, ‘get Addington Peace

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—he is the man.' You were off duty. I inquired your address; I am here. And, now, what are you going to do?"

"Can you remember who it was that introduced the subject of precious stones at your luncheon-party?" asked Inspector Peace.

"'Pon my life, I don't know," said the colonel, polishing his eye-glass with a red silk pocket-handkerchief. "It was one of the fellows at the other end of the table, but I can't say which of them."

"Yet, it is presumable that the guest who came with an imitation diamond in his pocket is the man who started a discussion which resulted in Mr. Taubery producing his latest treasure."

"So it is, by Jove!" cried the colonel; "I never thought of it. Clever work, Inspector, eh?"

"Exactly," said Peace, blandly. "And, now, as regards the place in which the robbery was committed."

"I locked the door," answered the colonel, smacking his trousers'-pocket.

"Please let me have the key. Thank you. And now as to the windows. Were they closed and fastened?"

"I saw to it myself."

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"After the search in the library, did any of the guests return to the dining-room?"

"I am no fool, Inspector. I left old Julius there to see to that. No one went back. When I had finished searching I joined Julius, and we locked up together. The butler had called in the policeman on the beat, and I left him sitting in the passage watching the door and drinking beer."

"I must go to Portland Place. What is the number?"

"I will drive you there with all the pleasure in the world, Inspector," said the colonel, cheerfully. "Come along."

I left them at the foot of the stairs, obtaining a whispered promise from the detective that he would give me a call that night if it was not too late when he returned.

I spent a disconsolate evening at the club. Never did I play a more degraded hand at bridge, though I should certainly have taken exception to the remarks of my partner under more ordinary circumstance. There is a point at which fair criticism ends and deliberate insult begins.

By ten o'clock I was back again in my rooms, where I loitered, amongst my books and pictures, in restless expectation. It was

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chiming midnight when there came a discreet tap at my outer door, and Addington Poace walked in. He sat himself down in the easy-chair I offered, and permitted me to mix him a whisky and soda.

“ Tell me, have you found the diamond ? ”
I said eagerly.

“ No.”

“ Nor the thief ? ”

“ I know him to be one of five men—that is all.”

“ Five ? And how do you make that out ? ”

“ It is very simple. The real diamond was examined by Professor Endicott ; it was an imitation that reached Sir Andrew Carillon. Therefore it is reasonable that one of the five who sat between them changed the one for the other.”

“ So you strike out the Professor and Sir Andrew ? ”

“ If either of them had been implicated they would hardly have raised the quarrel that resulted in the discovery of the theft.”

“ And this suspected five—who are they ? ”

“ Our friend Colonel Gunton, Mr. Thomas Craddock, a clerk in the War Office ; the Hon. George Carstairs, Lord Wintone's brother ;

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Mr. Abel Field, of Grey and Field, car manufacturers; and the Rev. Aubrey Power, a minor canon of Westminster Abbey. I have made some light inquiries and find nothing against them. Carstairs, Craddock, and Power, are men of moderate income, the other two are rich.

“Yet this gives us one important conclusion. The actual thief is an amateur in crime. So far as any one knows, this is his first offence. But it was not a sudden temptation to which he yielded. On the contrary, he was carrying out his share in a plot that had been long and carefully prepared. He substituted an imitation diamond for the original as it passed through his hands—an easy matter; but who thought out the scheme, who had this admirable imitation made, who knew that Taubery was leaving the country and that the diamond was to be sent immediately to the strong-room of a bank, where the substitution that had taken place might not be discovered for months, perhaps years?

“Who, in short, had the clever brain, the far-sighted judgment, the familiarity with jewels and those who deal in them, all of which would be required in the originator of such a fraud? Not Gunton, nor Craddock,

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nor Carstairs, nor Field, nor the Rev. Aubrey Power. There is some one who has influence over one of these men, some one pulling the strings behind the curtain. I shall consider it an honour to make that person's arrest, Mr. Phillips."

Inspector Addington Peace beamed upon me as he concluded with an expression of hopeful enthusiasm, and lit a cigarette at my reading-lamp.

"This unknown criminal genius has got the diamond, anyway," I said.

"I am not so sure of that. Consider the position of the actual thief on the discovery that the stone was false. He must have been in a state of blind terror. If we may suppose that Colonel Gunton is innocent, the bellowing of that worthy gentleman must have frightened him the more. To be searched, discovered, and actually disgraced—a pleasant prospect, surely! We may take it that he was heartily sorry for the part he had played; that he wished the diamond a thousand miles away. To get rid of it previous to the ordeal before the Colonel and Professor Endicott in the library—that would be his object."

"Yet here I am met by the simple difficulty that I cannot find the diamond. I have

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made the closest investigation without result. As Colonel Gunton told us, Mr. Taubery remained in the dining-room to see that none of the guests returned after they had been searched. The door was subsequently locked and a policeman stationed in the passage outside; the windows were fastened. Therefore the thief could not come back to recover what he had temporarily hidden. All which might seem to prove that, though Colonel Gunton affirms that he went through the guests with an expert hand, one of them managed to keep the diamond about him and carry it away. Yet such an achievement suggests rather the professional than the amateur criminal. And, if for that reason alone, I believe that the stone is still in the house. However, we ought to be able to decide that point within a week."

"I can't see why, Peace," I said.

"No? Then, pray don't trouble about it. And really, Mr. Phillips, as I have a long day's work before me, it is time I was off to bed. Do you know it is one o'clock?"

I knew how useless it was to question the little man when he thought he had told enough. So I bade him good night with the best grace that disappointment would permit.

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It had been kind of him to trouble about me, after all.

Three days went by, and I had not had the chance of asking Peace for news. For two nights, as I discovered by inquiry, he slept out, only appearing for an hour about noon to change his linen; for he was most careful of his appearance and as cleanly as a cat. Indeed, I had a secret belief that his nails were regularly manicured in Bond Street. When I did see him it was by accident, and, to be frank, nothing he had done gave me a greater surprise.

I was walking through Kensington Gardens about eleven o'clock on a visit to a friend whose studio lay to the north of the park. It was charming weather. The fresh leaves on the smoke-black boughs, the flower-beds rich in variegated colouring, the deep-throated coo of the pigeons, the chatter of innumerable sparrows, all told that winter was passed and spring was calling a welcome to summer. I had just turned from a long shrub-walled walk into an open space when I came upon the amazing spectacle of Addington Peace flirting with a very pretty nursemaid.

Whatever the little inspector had been, whatever he was, there was nothing of the

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Don Juan in his composition. I had already noticed that he took pains to avoid the opposite sex, with that uneasy consciousness of their presence which marks the bachelor with principles. Yet there he sat, sharing the same bench and talking earnestly into her ear, while before them a little boy pedalled industriously up and down upon a tricycle-horse, a long-maned, long-tailed toy set on three wheels, and propelled by indifferent pedals. It was idyllic, domestic, but distinctly surprising.

As I passed the bench, Peace stared at me without a glimmer of recognition in his keen grey eyes.

I had just finished my breakfast next morning, when in walked the inspector. I laughed, indeed I could not help it; and he answered me with a quick glance, half annoyance, half reproach.

"Something is going to happen to-day in the matter of the diamond," he said. "But, I warn you, Mr. Phillips, that if you intend to make fun of me you shan't know a word about it."

"You entirely misjudge me," I said, sticking my nose into my coffee-cup to hide a grin.

"Very well. There is a sale of furniture

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to-day, at the house of Mr. Julius Taubery, No. 204 Portland Place, the 'property of a gentleman going abroad for the benefit of his health,' as the catalogue has it. I should advise you to be here a little before four o'clock this afternoon."

"I am very much obliged to you, Peace," I said, making a note of the number on my shirt-cuff.

He nodded, with a faint shadow of a smile at the corners of his mouth, shook a finger of warning, and trotted out of the room.

I was punctual at my appointment and shouldered my way through the crowd of chattering dealers, into the big dining-room of No. 204. A private auction to me always seems a melancholy business. True, I knew that in this case the owner was a rich man, that his furniture and carpets and fittings had been bought only a year or two before, and were not the loved collection of years. But the tumbled disorder, the mud of many feet upon the floor, the noise of the bidders answering the raucous voice of the auctioneer, were all an insult to the peace, the privacy, and the hospitable memories of a stately home. It was with relief that I saw Colonel Gunton's eyeglass shining near the

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window, and elbowed my way towards him. He had a little boy with him, whom he carried perched on his shoulder, well out of the way of the crowd."

"Hello, Phillips," he shouted, in a tone that successfully competed with the auctioneer's. "Come to see the last of old Taubery's household gods, eh? Confound those dealers, what a noise they make bidding for that table. 'Pon my soul, when I think how many good dinners I've had with my toes underneath it, I feel quite sentimental, I do, Phillips, strike me."

To emphasize his sensations he glared ferociously at a weak individual who was pressed against him by a swirl in the crowd, and asked him what in thunder he thought he was doing.

The great table was bought, the last of the heavy furniture; and there only remained a few details that were auctioned, some separately, some in oddly assorted lots. It was during their sale that my talk with the colonel was interrupted by the little boy upon his shoulder.

"Oh, father," he cried, "there's George's bicycle-horse! Won't you buy me George's bicycle-horse?"

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A long-tailed, long-maned toy was raised by one of the auctioneer's men, who grinned under a running fire of chaff. I had an idea that I had seen that gallant charger before, though where I could not remember.

"Who is George?" I asked the colonel.

"It's Taubery's grandson. His daughter's a widow, you know; she and the boy live with the old people. Hi, there! ten shillings."

A grey-haired man in an overcoat who stood near by nodded his head at the auctioneer.

"Eleven shillings—going at eleven shillings."

"Fifteen," bawled the colonel.

"One pound," said the grey-haired man.

I had no idea what the cost of such toys might be; but the price, second-hand, seemed high. Several of the dealers gathered about the chair on which the auctioneer was standing looked back at us over their shoulders.

"Confound those dealers!" cried the colonel. "If an outside buyer wants anything they try to squeeze him out. They're all in league. It ought to be stopped. It's a monstrous shame. It's iniquitous. Twenty-five shillings to you, sir."

"Thirty," said the grey-haired man.

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“Two pounds.”

As the bids increased the temper of the colonel grew worse and worse. Those who were well out of his reach began to chuckle, and finally to laugh outright. At four pounds ten he hesitated. With a supreme effort he made it five.

“Guineas,” said the grey-haired man.

I am sorry to say that the colonel swore. In one stupendous oath he denounced all who dealt in second-hand goods of any description whatsoever. Then, with the little boy sobbing on his shoulder, he surged through the crowd like a battleship in a head sea, and disappeared amid a burst of disrespectful laughter. It was before the auctioneer had sufficiently recovered from his surprise that I felt a gentle touch on my arm. It was Addington Peace.

“There is a four-wheeled cab waiting about thirty yards up the street,” he whispered. “Go and get into it. I will join you presently.”

Quite half an hour had dragged by when the cab door was swung open and the detective sprang in. At the same time I noticed a covered cart with a black pony in the shafts pass the other window at a leisurely pace.

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Our driver must have had his orders, for he turned his horse and followed in the same direction.

Peace remained silent, so I left him alone and contented myself with staring out of the window. We were going northward towards Hampstead. The lines of houses broke up into separate villas. Lilac and laburnum bushes peeped over the garden walls. The throng of traffic grew thinner, the pavement less crowded. It was past five when we drew up at a little public-house standing back from the road. Peace toddled out, and I followed at his heels.

"He is unloading his cart in Ashley Street, yonder," said the driver, leaning from the box, as he pointed with his whip to a side road. "Do you want me to wait, sir?"

The inspector nodded and disappeared through the inn door, leaving me on the pavement. As he had given me no orders, I strolled back to the corner and peeped down the road, which ran at right angles to the one in which I was.

About forty yards away stood the little covered cart with the grey-haired dealer of the auction-room talking to a lad beside it. Presently the lad crawled under the canvas

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hood, and handed down the identical long-tailed horse that had brought about the public discomfiture of the gallant Colonel Gunton. The dealer pushed it across the stone pavement into a little furniture shop, and the boy, whipping up the black pony, drove quickly away.

I turned back to find the detective at my elbow.

"Peace," I said, "what is your interest in that bicycle-horse?"

"It happens to play the comedy part in our little mystery."

"What do you mean?"

"Only that it has a hole in the saddle for a pommel should a little girl ride it, and the hole leads down to a hollow inside. Do you guess what it was that dropped into the hollow inside?"

"Not Mr. Taubery's diamond?"

"Exactly. Yet we have still to find out the man who put it there."

"But, in the mean time, the old dealer may——"

"Tut, tut, Mr. Phillips. The old dealer has nothing to do with it. He is only obeying an order to buy the toy whatever it cost, and to keep it until called for. We may have

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to waste some time, so I have ordered a steak and fried potatoes in an upper room that conveniently overlooks the door of his shop. Let me show you the way."

We passed through a long bar at which a dingy assemblage lounged and smoked, and so upstairs into a private room, the windows of which commanded Ashley Street. We ate our meal in relays—one watching at the window, while the other disposed of his section of stringy streak and heavy beer. The daylight softly faded, the gas jets sprang out along the street, the tramp of home-coming fathers dropped into silence—but there was still no caller at the furniture-shop. The shutters had been put up for the night. It seemed plain to me that nothing would happen for that evening at least, though Peace did not seem to despond.

Nine o'clock—ten o'clock—ten thirty, and the customer arrived.

I had watched his cab come rattling down the street with a casual interest, for many had come and gone since we first mounted guard. It had passed the little shop, and was almost beneath us, when a head was thrust out of the window and a voice cried irritably to the cabman. A street-lamp showed him to me

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clearly—a white-faced youth with a straggly, brown moustache and an indecisive chin.

The cab turned about, and pulled up opposite the shop door. The inspector touched my arm, and we walked down the stairs, picked up our driver, who was smoking in the bar, and so bundled into our own vehicle. A few whispered instructions, and we drove slowly round the corner into Ashley Street.

The customer had been expected. As we passed the shop at a walking pace, I could see that the dealer and his assistant were hoisting the bicycle-horse to the roof of the waiting cab. Fifty yards more, and we drew up by the pavement.

Peace kept the windows closed, so that I could not look back along the road; but through the glass in front I could see that our driver was quietly taking note of affairs. It was not the first time that the inspector had employed him, as I learnt afterwards, and the man knew his business.

Suddenly our cab whisked round and set off at a rapid pace. The stranger had selected a fast horse, that was evident. We swung through a maze of narrow streets, tugged up a long hill, skirted a stretch of open common—a part of Hampstead Heath, I believe—and

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finally stopped in the shade of some tall trees. As I got out I saw the lights of the chaise stationary at some distance up the road.

"There may be trouble, Mr. Phillips," whispered the little detective. "I'm not certain I ought to bring you along. If anything——"

"Nonsense!" I interrupted, glancing down at him with some amusement.

"Well, take this, anyway. I had it from a German burglar."

He thrust a strip of hardened rubber into my hand, about eighteen inches in length by two in thickness.

"It will stun a man without leaving a mark," he said gently.

The four-wheeler that we had followed was waiting before a green door set in a high brick wall. Without any attempt at concealment, Peace walked to the door and tried the handle. It was not locked, and we passed into a fair-sized garden, set about with flower beds and clumps of laurel. In the middle I could see the outline of a square grey house. Two of the ground-floor rooms glowed behind their curtains, the rest was darkness.

We crossed a corner of the lawn, and

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stopped behind a patch of bushes directly in front of the entrance porch. The night was very still and silent. What desperate men were gathered in that quiet place? How could we hope to arrest them flushed with the triumph of so splendid a prize. To be truthful, I began to feel a certain anxiety for our position; though upon Peace's face, showing white in the gloom, was a look of perfect serenity—a look that I could not understand.

“Mercy, oh, mercy!”

It was a trembling wail of terror, a wail that was suddenly blotted out by a roar like the challenge of a bull. From within the house came the crash of overturned chairs and the jingle of breaking glass. And all the time the shrieks and hoarse ravings drew nearer and louder, until, with a loud bang, the hall door was flung open and a man tumbled down the steps as if thrown from a catapult. His assailant, in black silhouette against the hall lights, hesitated for a moment, stick in hand. Then, with a shout of rage, he sprang forward and struck at the moaning wretch who squirmed on the gravel at his feet.

“Now, Jack Steadman, that is quite enough,” said the inspector, pushing his way through the laurels.

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"And who may you be?" cried the other, with a furious oath.

"My name is Addington Peace, of the Criminal Investigation Department of Scotland Yard, and I arrest you both for being concerned in the robbery of a valuable diamond, the property of Mr. Julius Taubery."

"Stolen a diamond!" he bellowed. "Do you call that a diamond?"

He flung down a stone that sparkled in the lights behind him, and stamped it into the gravel with his heel.

"I am aware that it is the imitation," said the inspector. "But it was not your fault that you missed the real thing. I have a cab waiting. You had better come with me quietly. And I warn you, Steadman, that anything you say will be used in evidence against you."

* * * * *

It was after two in the morning before the inspector tapped at the door of my rooms. I had made the fourth of that odd cab load to the nearest police-station; for, though Mr. Jack Steadman had blustered, and the Hon. George Carstairs had grovelled and whined thither, they had consented to go at last. And there I had left the detective and his

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prisoners, driving to my rooms to await his return.

"The case was not quite so difficult as you suppose, Mr. Phillips," he said, in answer to my question. "You remember that I believed the diamond to be still in the house?"

"Certainly."

"It would be hard to imagine a more useful bait. It was certain that the thieves would have another bite at it; it was also certain that I ought to be able to hook them when they did. Yet I very nearly lost the diamond, after all. Taubery, Gunton, and the servants had all declared that, since the robbery, nothing had been moved from the dining-room, passage, or library. There they made a mistake.

"Taubery's little grandson, George, happened to leave his toy horse in the passage from the dining-room, and into the hole made for the pommel that poor creature, Carstairs, had dropped the diamond with a last despairing effort to get rid of it before Colonel Gunton searched him. Ten minutes afterwards the little boy went out for a walk with his nurse, taking the horse with him. When he returned it was left, as usual, in the servants' quarters at the back. I never set eyes on it until a day later. Even then I should not have suspected what

Mr. Taubery's Diamond

it contained had not the nurse complained to me of a man who followed her when she took George for his daily airing in the Park. That was the sign for which I had been looking. I accompanied the pair on the following morning. I saw the man, but did not recognize him.

"Neither the nurse nor the boy could well be carrying the diamond about with them. There remained the horse. That night I extracted the real diamond, and not wishing to spoil my bait for the shy fish, I dropped the imitation stone into its place.

"The toy was watched by night and day. It was through a hint from me that it was included in the sale. Poor Colonel Gunton! I admit that his eccentric bidding startled me for a moment.

"You can understand Steadman's fury when, after all his plots and risks and expenditure, his silly dupe brought him back the identical imitation stone that had been made to deceive old Taubery. I don't believe that the Trojans could have been more astonished when the Greeks emerged from the wooden horse, than was Steadman when he took out the diamond from the toy and found it to be the imitation!"

"And who is Steadman?"

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“A very dangerous fellow, Mr. Phillips. I recognized him the moment he appeared at the door. For years he was a bookmaker in Paris, but left when the place got too hot for him. As a card-player he is well known and avoided. He has been in low water lately. So has his dupe, Carstairs, as I now discover. Lord Wintone, the young man’s brother, set him up as a coffee-planter in Ceylon, but he spent all the money given him and returned six months ago. Carstairs was a distant connection of Mrs. Taubery’s, and both she and her husband had been very kind to him. He was always loafing about the house, getting free meals and now and then borrowing a fiver. He must have heard of the new diamond and mentioned it to Steadman; for Steadman hatched the plot—there is no doubt about that. Carstairs was merely a dupe and a foolish, vicious dupe at that—he never had the ability to rise higher in crime. How the two became acquainted I do not know; but they have been seen together several times lately. You may take my word for it, that the public will be well rid of them for a year or two.”

IV

THE MYSTERY OF THE
CAUSEWAY

IV

THE MYSTERY OF THE CAUSEWAY

It was on Thursday, May 18th, 1899, that young Sir Andrew Cheyne was found dead of a gunshot wound in the grounds of Airlie Hall, his house in Surrey.

I was myself especially interested in the case, as I was staying at a cottage within three miles of the Hall at the time. All the gossip came to us first hand. By breakfast we learned of the death. An hour later came the rumour of murder, and the fact that an arrest had been made. A man had been caught running from the spot where the body lay.

My host was a bachelor and a brother artist. His little place was bound by no conventions. Go or come, but don't trouble to explain—such was the custom. He was

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busy that morning, as I knew, so I appropriated his bicycle and set off through the lanes to visit the scene of the tragedy.

Airlie Hall lay some two hundred yards back from the main road. The drive, framed in wide stretches of turf, and flanked by a triple avenue of chestnuts, ran in a straight line from the great porch to the entrance gates of twisted iron. Peering through the bars were a dozen villagers. Within, his hand upon the lock, stood a policeman, massive, red-faced, pompous with his present importance.

"May I come in?" I asked politely.

"You may not," he said quite briefly.

I put my hand in my pocket, hesitated, and drew it out empty. It was too public a place for corruption. If Addington Peace had only been with me, I thought—and, so thinking, came by an idea. Even a rural policeman would know the famous detective's name.

"My friend, Inspector Peace——" I began.

"Inspector who?" he interrupted.

"Addington Peace, of the Criminal Investigation Department. I hoped he would be here."

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His manner changed with a celerity which was the greatest compliment he could have paid to the little detective.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he said. "The inspector drove up from the station not ten minutes ago. If you will inquire at the Hall, you will be sure to find him."

The servant who answered my modest ring led me through a dark passage of panelled oak and out upon the terrace that lay on the farther side of the house. Below it a sloping lawn ran down to a broad lake fringed with reeds. Beyond the lake a park stretched away dotted with single oaks now struggling into foliage. It was a lovely view, unmolested by the centuries. As it was so it had been three hundred years before, when some courtier of Elizabeth, in tightly fitting hose and immaculate ruffles, chose it as the outlook from the windows of his dining-room.

In the middle of the terrace, Addington Peace stood, smoking a cigarette and talking to a tall and stately person in a black coat, who looked every inch the man he was—the butler of a British country house.

The little inspector turned, as he heard my footsteps on the gravel, and nodded a benevolent welcome.

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"A fine morning, Mr. Phillips," he said. "I did not know you were staying in the neighbourhood."

"I cycled over after hearing the news. Your name opened the gates, Inspector."

"Well, I am pleased to see you, anyhow. Mr. Roberts here was giving me his view of this unfortunate affair. You may continue, Mr. Roberts."

The butler had been staring at me with great suspicion; but apparently he concluded that, as a friend of a detective, I was a respectable person.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, in a soft, oily voice, as from confirmed overeating, "my mind is, so to speak, a blank. But what I know I will say without fear or favour. Sir Andrew had not previously honoured us with his presence, he having remained abroad from the death of Sir William, which was his uncle, some six months ago. Yesterday—that is, Thursday morning—he wired from London for a carriage to meet the 12.32 train. We were all in a flutter of excitement, as you can well imagine. But when he arrived, it was, he said, with no intention of staying the night. During the afternoon he saw his agent on business, and afterwards went for a

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walk, returning about six. He dined at eight, and had his coffee served in the small library.

“The last train to London was at 10.25, and we had our orders for a carriage to be ready for him at five minutes to the hour. At ten o'clock precisely I took the liberty of entering the small library to inform Sir Andrew that the carriage was waiting, and that there was only just time to catch the train. He was not there, and, the windows on to the terrace being open, I walked through to see if he was sitting outside, the evening being salubrious for the time of the year. It was while I was there that I heard the footsteps of some one running on the gravel, and, first thing I knew, who should appear but Jake Warner, the keeper. ‘Hello, Mr. Warner,’ I says, ‘and where may you be going in such a hurry? Is it poachers?’ I says. ‘No,’ says he, in a sad taking, ‘but Sir Andrew’s been shot—shot dead, Mr. Roberts, on the causeway to the island.’ ‘Heaven defend us,’ I says; ‘but do——’”

“Quite so, Mr. Roberts,” said Peace. “We understand you were much upset. So you have no idea when it was that Sir Andrew left the little library?”

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"No, sir, save that it was between nine and ten."

"Thank you. And now, Mr. Phillips, I think we will go down and have a look at the causeway walk."

At the end of the terrace we found a policeman waiting. He touched his helmet to the inspector, and, after a few words with him, led the way down some moss-grown steps and over a sloping lawn towards the lake. We skirted the right hand edge for perhaps two hundred yards, until we came to where a short causeway of stone had been built out into the water, joining the lawns to a shrub-grown island. The roof of a gabled cottage peeped out from the heart of its yews and laurels. The causeway, paved with great slabs of slate, was never more than five feet broad. On either side of it was a dense growth of feathery reeds, hiding the lake behind their rustling walls.

"What cottage is that?" asked Peace, pointing a finger.

"When he was a young man, Sir William, that was Sir Andrew's uncle, used to give lunches and teas there in the summer months," said the policeman. "But the place has been shut up for a long time now,

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sir. No one goes to the island barring the ducks, and they nest there by the hundred."

"Where did you catch the prisoner?"

"About this very place, sir. It was about half-past nine, and I was walking down the public footpath, which passes the east corner of the lake, when I heard the shot. It seemed a strange time of the year for night poaching, but there are rascals in the village who wouldn't hesitate about the seasons so long as they had a duck for dinner.

"Off I raced as hard as I could put legs to the ground. When I came to the causeway head I pulled up and looked about me. There was a slip of a moon over the island, and a plenty of stars, so that the night was fairly bright. No one was in sight, but presently I heard the thump, thump, of a man running over turf, and who should come panting down the slope but Jake Warner, the keeper. He was in such a hurry that he was nigh as close as I am to you, sir, before he saw me.

"'Good Lord!' he cried, jumping back; 'and what are you doing here?'

"'Didn't you hear a shot fired?' I asked.

"'Not a sound of it,' he said, with a sulky face on him.

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“It surprised me more than a bit. Indeed, I had begun to wonder if I could have been mistaken, when there came a clatter on the slabs of the causeway, and a man rushed out from the reeds like a mad thing. He gave a little cry like a frightened rabbit when he caught sight of us, and tried to twist away, but his feet slipped from under him, and down he fell. Before he could recover I was sitting on his chest.

“‘I had no hand in it,’ he shouted. ‘I swear to you it was not me. I was to meet him on the island. He was dead when I came to him.’

“‘Dead—who is dead?’ asked Jake, very anxious.

“‘Sir Andrew Cheyne,’ said the man, with a shiver.

“I was that taken aback that if he had made a run for it he might have done so for all I could have stopped him. As for Jake, he gave a yelp and disappeared down the causeway, like a rat into a hole.

“‘Sir Andrew is in France,’ I said, for so Mr. Roberts had told me not a week before. ‘You’re crazy, man.’

“‘Shut your mouth, you fool’—those were his very words, sir—‘I tell you Cheyne is dead. Go and look for yourself.’

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“‘I must trouble you to come with me, then,’ said I, taking him by the collar.

“We walked down the causeway between the reeds, he in front and me behind with my hand in his neck. About halfway down we came upon Jake, who was kneeling by the body, which lay flat on its back. I had never seen Sir Andrew and no more had Jake, so we had to take the stranger’s word for it. When we found there was no sign of life left in him, I sent Jake to get assistance. He came back with Mr. Roberts and two of the men, who carried away the body up to the house, while I arrested my prisoner and walked him off to the lock-up. We found a loaded revolver upon him. He refused to say who he was or to make any explanation.”

“And afterwards?” asked Addington Peace.

“I searched the causeway as soon as it was light. There was nothing to be found. But the evidence against the prisoner seems clear enough, saving the fact that the shot-gun he used has disappeared. He must have thrown it into the water. They will drag the lake for it this afternoon. We’ve got the real murderer all right, don’t you think, sir?”

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"Did you search the island before you left last night?"

"No, sir."

"Might not another man have been concealed there?"

The policeman did not reply, save by colouring a deeper red and staring hard at his boots.

"Well, well, no one can think of everything," said Peace, with a flicker of a smile. "Come and show me where you found him."

The dark stain upon the slabs between the nodding reeds was sign-post sufficient. The little detective took one look at the spot, and then stood with his hands behind his back, peering about him.

"Were the prisoner's clothes wet?" he asked quietly.

"No, sir; quite dry."

"And how deep is the lake?"

"From three to six feet, or so I've always heard."

"Is there a boat on it?"

"Jake keeps an old punt, I believe, but the pleasure craft are under lock and key in the boathouse. They've not been in the water for years, and would leak like sieves."

"That is all. Go up to the house and

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wait for me there. I shall be back in an hour or so."

The policeman saluted and retired down the causeway, his heavy boots clattering upon the stones.

"Now we can get to work, Mr. Phillips," said the little man, cheerfully, his eyes dancing with a pleasant expectation. "While I am making a little examination of the causeway, I should be obliged if you will wait for me at the cottage on the island yonder."

The last thing I saw of him was a neat boot sticking out from the reeds into which he was crawling on hands and knees.

The cottage was an old-fashioned, one-storied building. The red tiles of its gabled roof had been delicately toned by age until they had sunk to a colour very restful to an artist's eye. Wooden shutters blocked the windows; its door of stained and worm-eaten oak was firmly secured. A path led through straggling laurel bushes from the door to the lake, and I walked down it to the loud outcry of the nesting ducks that rose with flapping wings about me and circled round to splash into the water at a safe distance. By a dilapidated wooden landing-stage I stopped to light a cigarette. As I threw away the match

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a ragged tear in the deep moss that covered the planking caught my eye. I stooped to examine it. Under the moss the wood itself was splintered with a deep, fresh scar! I studied the rest of the landing-stage without result. Neither the moss nor the exposed patches of woodwork showed any similar signs. The one fresh scar—that was all.

I was still considering the problem when Peace joined me. He was in high good humour. For a time he stared at the mark with his head on one side like a meditative sparrow, and then, seizing me by the arm, led me back by the way we had come.

“Picturesque, eh!” he said, pointing to the old pavilion. “It catches your artistic eye. Perhaps you will have time to make a sketch of it this afternoon.”

“Nonsense,” I said, irritably enough. “Who shot this poor fellow?”

“No one.”

“What—suicide?”

“Nothing so simple, I’m afraid. Now, don’t lose your temper. You will understand within the hour. Come along.”

“Where are we going?”

“To visit our esteemed friend Jake Warner. There is just a chance he may

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show temper. Shall we risk it, Mr. Phillips, or shall we call the policeman from the house yonder ? ”

I told him quite briefly that I would see the policeman condemned first.

Warner's cottage was a straw-thatched, ivy-covered little place, built on the slope of the park. Beneath it a brook that carried the overflow from the lake gurgled monotonously by. A thin, long-legged man, who was digging in a patch of garden, stopped his work at sight of us and waited, leaning on his spade.

“ Jake Warner, isn't it ? ” Peace inquired over the low fence of split pine.

“ Yes, sir.”

“ I am Inspector Addington Peace, of the Criminal Investigation Department.”

Warner said nothing, but I saw his fingers clench upon his spade, as he gave the detective stare for stare.

“ A fairly good breeding season for the ducks, I should imagine,” continued the little man, with a benevolent interest.

There was still no reply.

“ I understand the foxes are very troublesome.”

Warner threw down his spade and strode up to where we stood. His eyes had in

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them the dumb agony of a wild thing in a trap.

"I am a married man, sir," he said. "For my wife's sake take me away quietly."

"I have not come to arrest you, Jake Warner," said Peace. "If you are responsible for your master's death, it was by sheer accident. But the question is, are you responsible?"

"No, sir, I am not. But I can never prove it."

"Perhaps it would be best if you explained."

We remained where we were, with the fence between us, while he told his story.

"It was on Monday afternoon, sir," he said, addressing the detective. "I was crossing the public footpath that runs near the other end of the lake, when I fell in with a middle-aged, spectacled gentleman, who was strolling along with a tin collecting-case on his back, such as botanists use. We fell to talking, and one thing led to another, until, when I turned off down to the lake to see after my ducks, he came with me. He never meant no harm as I know of, but I would give all I have never to have seen him."

"What was he like?" asked the inspector.

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“A short fellow, with a brown full beard and a slight stutter. Very pleasant he was to talk to ; but this is outside the point, sir, as you will see. We walked down the causeway, and just before the pavilion what should we come across but three dead birds, all with their heads bitten clean off. It made me wild, for the foxes have been plaguing me cruel this spring. Sir William never would have one shot, though he had given up hunting many years. As for the young master, I couldn't say as to his views, for I had never set eyes upon him.

“The stranger, he sympathized very kindly with me, and I told him my troubles. ‘How they can expect a keeper to rear a decent lot of wild duck with a plague of foxes in his midst, I'm dashed if I know,’ I said. He allowed that a fox who would kill ducks like that was as bad as a man-eating tiger. ‘She's a cunning old vixen as won't let me get within shot of her,’ I told him, ‘but I've half a mind to set a spring gun for her on the causeway here.’

“Bless my soul, how that fellow laughed. He threw back his head and crowed with joy at my idea. ‘A spring gun for a fox,’ he says ; ‘why, keeper, it's the very thing !

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Think of the simplicity of it and the certainty of it and the security of it.' Those were his words. After that he sobered down and began talking more serious. Did I really understand how best to set a spring gun? I told him no; and then he explained how he had a friend from India who had often used them to kill jackals. Whether I did right or wrong, the fact is that I agreed to set the gun when he sent me the instructions.

"Well, sir, his letter arrived yesterday morning with careful little plans and all. I loaded my gun with buckshot and carried it down to the causeway shortly after dusk. I had lost several more ducks each day, and my mind was made up to have that old vixen. I fixed the gun, with a thread of strong cotton across the path and round the trigger. You may think I took a wicked risk, but I had hardly ever known any one to pass along the causeway in the daytime, far less at night. Yet, for safety's sake, I meant to take it up again at dawn.

"I walked home and sat smoking my pipe for a while. But I was worried and disturbed. I couldn't get it from my mind that there was danger in that spring gun left to itself as it were. Even if I bagged the old vixen some

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one might hear the shot and find the body. A dead fox would make me a marked man amongst all the hunting people about. I didn't like that thought neither. At last I couldn't stand it no longer, and set off back to the causeway. I was more than half-way when I heard the shot, and that set me running. When I saw the policeman I was mightily afraid he would be finding the vixen dead. That's why I lied to him."

"I know the rest, Warner," said Peace ; "but I want a few details. Did you see any sign of another man ? "

"No, sir."

"Where was Sir Andrew hit ? "

"The chest, sir ; he got it full in the chest."

"So I understood. A curious elevation of the muzzle, eh ? Did you expect a fox over five feet high ? "

Peace brought out the words with a snap, but the keeper answered him without hesitation.

"That is the point, sir," he said. "That is why I am not responsible for the master's death. I set the gun at a level of eight inches from the ground, which I reckoned would take the fox about the shoulder. Some one

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altered the elevation of the muzzle after I had gone."

"The second forked stick that supported the gun was in the mud. Might it not have sunk under the weight, and thus raised the muzzle?"

"No, sir. I had pushed it through the mud down to the gravel. It was a good foot deeper when I went to look at it. A man must have used great force to get it so far through the gravel."

"What became of the gun?"

"After they carried Sir Andrew away, I must have gone off my head for awhile. What would they say to me for setting such a trap for my master? That was the only thing I could think about. I ran back and pulled up the sticks, and carried away the gun to the cottage here."

"But you saw the policeman arrest the man whom we may presume to be the murderer?"

"Yes, sir; but I was too wild to reason it out. I made up my mind this morning to tell them all about it at the inquest. That is the truth."

"Did you use the punt last night?"

"No, sir, it must have been the man that

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was caught. I missed her this morning, and after a search found her in the reeds near the island where she had drifted. Though I don't see how you could have known anything about the punt, sir."

"The iron-shod pole had chipped the landing-stage. The other man had ferried himself across rather than use the causeway. And now please fetch me the plans and the gun."

When Warner returned, Peace slipped the envelope into his pocket, and examined the weapon with great care, snapping the lock twice.

"You had eased the trigger, eh?"

"Yes, sir; I thought a light pull would be best, so I oiled and loosened the screws."

The little man handed it back to him and turned away, staring over the lake towards the distant woodlands, with his lithe hands clasped behind his back.

"That fellow, sir—he must have done it, don't you think?" asked the under-keeper.

"So it would seem, Warner," said Addington Peace over his shoulder.

* * * * *

It was eleven o'clock on the following day when Peace was announced. I was sitting in

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the garden of my friend's cottage smoking my pipe and reading the paper. From within the villa came the sound of whistling that told of my host working at his Academy picture.

"Why, Peace," I said, "what brings you here?"

He seated himself on a corner of the garden-bench and lit a cigarette.

"I went back to London last night," he told me. "And as I had to pass your friend's house on the way from the station to Airlie Hall, I thought I would call in and see you."

"Any further news?"

"I have had an interesting visit. The botanist with the beard has stepped into a leading part in our little tragedy, Mr. Phillips."

"Do you mean——"

"Yes, I believe him to be the murderer of Sir Andrew Cheyne."

"Then the man under arrest is innocent."

"That scarcely describes him—but he had no hand in this crime."

"Confound you and your riddles," I said. "Where is the murderer? Have you caught him?"

"There is a carriage at the door. If you

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care to come along perhaps I may be able to show him to you."

It was a swift horse from the stables of Airlie Hall, and we covered the ground quickly. There was little talk between us. Twelve had struck when we stepped out at the overhanging porch of the old grey mansion and walked through into the library that overlooked the terrace and the lake. By the window, twisting his cap in his nervous fingers, stood Jake Warner. Peace nodded him a good morning, and then slipped away with a word of apology.

"The detective gentleman wired that he wanted to see me," said Warner, anxiously. "Do you know why, sir?"

I told him no, and he dropped into an uneasy silence. I amused myself by walking from picture to picture, for the walls were hung with splendid portraits—Gainsborough, Lely, and Romney—it was a veritable exhibition of those great masters. At last the door opened and the little man appeared, glancing from one to the other of us with his shrewd, observant eyes.

"Will you follow me, if you please?" he said.

We tramped up the great staircase, a wide

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sweep of polished oak, where a dozen men could have walked abreast, and so down a high-roofed passage into a majestic bedroom. In the centre stood a venerable four-post bedstead. The columns that supported the canopy were finely carved, and over the head was a faded coat of arms pictured in the needlework of two hundred years ago. The lattice windows were open. From without came the faint piping of the nesting birds.

Upon the bed lay something covered with white sheeting.

Peace walked up to it and paused, staring hard at the keeper, who stood beside me. Then with a gentle hand he lifted the sheet. On the pillow lay the head of an elderly man, dark, and full bearded.

Warner stepped back, clutching my arm.

"It's the botanist," he stammered. "What is he doing here? Was it him as killed the master, sir?"

"Yes," said the little detective; "he killed Sir Andrew Cheyne."

For a moment he stooped, busying himself about the head. With a gentle pull he lifted the heavy beard away. It was a face younger by a score of years that lay upon the pillows,

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a face handsome, after its fashion, though deep lined with evil days and ways.

"Sir Andrew himself," cried Warner, with a sob of terror.

"That is also true," said Inspector Addington Peace, reverently replacing the white sheet.

* * * * *

It was an hour afterwards that Peace gave me the details. We were leaning against the stone balustrade of the terrace looking over the lake to the pleasant park land beyond. The breeze-swept rushes that marked the line of the causeway, the gables of the island pavilion that peeped above the foliage, lay to our right, framed in the rippling blue of the mere.

"My first important discovery," he said, "was a strand of pack-thread tied to a young sapling at the spot where the body of Sir Andrew was found. On the other side of the path was a narrow hole between the slabs of granite, where a peg had lately been driven in. The rushes about it were broken here and there. The conclusion of a spring gun was obvious, and the reason suggested by the track of foxes along the edge of the reeds. Was the death an accident, after all? If so,

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what business had the stranger under arrest—Fenton, I now find, is his name—upon the island at so late an hour?

“My conversation with the keeper gave some interesting results. It was plainly murder, and no accident. Some one had raised the muzzle of the gun so that it might kill a man and not a fox. Some one had expected a visitor to the island that night against whom he desired to revenge himself. Was Fenton guilty? The evidence against him seemed almost conclusive. He had admitted, you will remember, that he had an appointment with Sir Andrew. Yet, after he had set the trap, why had he continued to risk discovery by loitering about the causeway? How had he known that the spring gun was there at all? Why had he brought a loaded revolver? Why had he borrowed the punt and reached the island by so unexpected a manner? Was he also afraid of some one or some thing? My mind began to turn from him to the second stranger, the botanist with the collecting-case. He at least had information about the setting of the gun.

“There was still a further point. Sir Andrew had been shot full in the chest. If he had been walking down the causeway he

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would have been hit in the side. How was that?

"Yesterday morning after I sent you away I walked into the village to make inquiries. They have few visitors, and the landlord of the inn remembered the bearded naturalist. He had only once visited the place, driving over from the station, and disappearing for several hours. A hot-tempered man, nervous and excitable—so he described him. When the cab was late he had broken out in a foreign tongue. That was all he knew of him.

"I caught the 3.15 to London and found Scotland Yard in the possession of some additional details. Sir Andrew had been in town for a fortnight living very quietly at a small private hotel off Piccadilly. He had no servant with him. He had been a wild, extravagant lad, they told me, and when his uncle had tired of paying his bills he had tried the stage, got deeper into debt, and finally fled to the Continent, where he lived on a small allowance that the old man made him. All this struck me as curious. The rake had indeed reformed if he heralded his accession to great wealth by dropping a servant and living quietly in a small hotel. Had he other reasons than economy?

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"I visited the hotel that night. Sir Andrew had received few callers, the porter told me. I described the botanist, but without success. Then I tried Fenton. The porter recognized my description at once. He had called twice, the first time shortly after Sir Andrew's arrival, the second time on Tuesday evening. The waiter who had taken him up to the baronet's sitting-room told me that the first interview had been long, and that they had quarrelled violently on the stairs.

" 'You shall never so much as see the place. If you go there before settling with me I communicate with the police at once.' He remembered some such threat shouted by Fenton on leaving. The second interview had been short, and, so far as he knew, friendly.

"I made a careful search of Sir Andrew's room. It was there that I solved the problem of the mystery; for in his dressing-case was an old 'make-up' box, no doubt a survival from his days upon the stage; and in the box was a full brown beard!"

"And so he was the botanist?" I said with a shiver.

"Yes, Mr. Phillips, he was the botanist."

There was silence between us for a while.

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I looked up at the splendid front of the ancient hall, and then across the lawns, over the sparkling mere to the park and the forest lands beyond.

“ Was it for this ? ” I asked with a wave of the hand.

“ Yes,” said Peace, “ I believe it to have been for Airlie Hall that he tried to kill Fenton. Heaven knows what dismal scandal the man held over him ; but it was probably sufficient to drive Sir Andrew from England for ever. From inquiries that we have made, it appears that Fenton had been living on Sir Andrew for over two years. It was undoubtedly a bad case of blackmail. The young man, on hearing of his uncle’s death, gave his persecutor the slip, and crossed to London. Fenton followed, and discovered him at his hotel. Probably he demanded a large sum, which was refused him. Whereupon he declared that the baronet should never so much as see Airlie Hall unless he paid, and left the young man with that threat upon him.

“ For days Sir Andrew stayed sulking in his rooms. He was a man of violent temper and unscrupulous past. Heaven knows what schemes of revenge he hatched in his rage and despair. Finally, on Monday last, he risked

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discovery, disguised himself in the beard, and went down to see the old place again. His meeting with the keeper was a chance, and their talk of spring-guns an equal accident. But the suggestion gave the baronet an idea. 'A spring-gun for a fox'—you remember his words as Warner told us. He laughed with hysterical joy at a means that would rid him of his enemy so simply and certainly. He made the excuse of the Indian friend, and saw Fenton again on Tuesday, giving him an appointment on the island at eleven o'clock on the following Thursday night, and at the same time promising to pay him what he asked at the meeting. By the last post on Wednesday he sent the plans to Warner in disguised handwriting and under a false name and address.

"Fenton suspected this sudden acquiescence. The scamp knew to what a state of impotent fury he had brought his victim. He took a revolver with him, and, having spied out the ground, crossed by the punt, instead of approaching the rendezvous by the causeway. Also, he came an hour and more before he was expected.

"Perhaps you now understand the plan. Sir Andrew intended to alter the gun and

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leave for the station before ten. Fenton would be killed at eleven, and the blame rest on Warner. No one could suspect the young baronet, who would be in the train at the time of the accident.

"Sir Andrew found the trap, lifted the gun off the supporting props, and drove the outer one a foot deeper into the ground. I could see the marks of his feet, where he had stood while he pushed and twisted the stick through the clay. He replaced the gun, which would now be at an angle to hit a man in the chest or neck. He stepped back, looking to see if there was any sign of the lurking death to alarm a passer-by.

"What happened I can only guess. He may have slipped on the old slabs. But it was enough that he touched the thread, and the trigger, oiled and eased by Warner, jarred off at once. It was in a manner suicide."

"So that is the explanation," I said, when he had ended.

"It is partly guess-work, of course," Peace told me; "but I think you will find that I am not far wrong when Fenton's trial comes on and, to save his neck, he makes a clean breast of his share in the business."

V

THE TRAGEDY OF THOMAS
HEARNE

V

THE TRAGEDY OF THOMAS
HEARNE

"Does not that sad underworld of crime in which you move sometimes drive you into a cynical disbelief in all mankind?" I suggested.

It was a bitter night, and the inspector and I were blowing our tobacco from seats confronting before a roaring fire. The wind rattling at the hasp of the window added the luxury of a reminder that it must be extremely unpleasant in the sleet-swept streets outside.

"Not how bad men are; it is how good they are that is surprising," quoted Peace, with a nod of his head.

We sat in silence for a while before he spoke again.

"I have let a breaker of the law go free in my time—perhaps more than once," he continued. "The law cannot take cognizance of all the tricks that Fate plays on man."

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I smelt a tale, and remained silent. Peace laughed.

"You think you have driven me into story-telling?" he said.

"I am at your mercy; but I hope so," I told him.

He leant forward, tapping the ashes from his pipe against the brass of the fender. Then he began—

"About a year ago I received a message from Guy's Hospital that there was a patient lying very ill who wished to see me. I recognized him the moment I set foot in the ward—a gentleman born and bred who had slipped down the ladder from running his own horses to dodging the police as a bookmaker's tout. He was a half-and-half man—too lazily clever to be quite honest, and too honest to be quite a criminal. Poor Jack Henderson! A good man gone wrong—let that be his epitaph when it comes to setting up his headstone.

"‘Well, Henderson,’ I said, ‘what’s the trouble?’

"‘I’m done, Peace,’ he whispered. ‘They’ve no more use for me this side of the black river; but I wanted to see you before I answered the call.’

"‘You mustn’t talk like that,’ I said,

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though he was looking pretty bad. 'They'll put you on your legs again in a month. You can bet on that, my lad.'

" 'It don't matter much either way'—he smiled, in a quiet way he had—'so let us get to business. You had your share of trouble, I understand, in the matter of Julius Craig last spring.'

"I nodded.

" 'I was in that job,' he said; 'and after what happened I should like to tell you the truth about it. I may have been a pretty bad lot in my time, Inspector; but I had my limits, and murder was one of them.'

"I won't try to give you his exact words, for the poor fellow spoke very slowly, with big pauses in between. But this is close upon the story as he told it to me.

* * * * *

I expect you know the Blue Shield in Percher Street. Take them one with another, the customers are about the worst crowd in all London. One Saturday night, towards the end of March—last year—I had joined the gang there, hoping to meet some friend with the price of a drink upon him, for I was broke to the wide, wide world. Bill Redman, who was afterwards lagged for bank-note

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forgeries in Manchester, had just ordered me a whisky, and I was sitting on a stool watching the barman reach down the special Scotch, when in walked a moon-faced fellow, very fat and prosperous, with a dark-blue overcoat and a diamond in his necktie. He looked about him, screwing up his eyes as a near-sighted man will do, and then came over to where I was sitting.

“Mr. Henderson, I believe?” he said.

“That’s my name,” I told him, wondering who he might be.

“I have been recommended to you by a—by a mutual friend,” he said; “but I cannot discuss my business here. My carriage is waiting, if you will give me your company for ten minutes.”

I hesitated a moment, until Redman, who seemed to know him, leant across, whispering that I should be a fool to refuse. The stranger pushed me into a brougham that was standing by the pavement opposite the door, and we started off at a smart pace. Once in Regent’s Park, however, the driver pulled his horse to a walk, and my companion began to do his talking.

“Five hundred sovereigns would be useful to you these days—eh, Mr. Henderson?”

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There was a smile all over his fat face as he said the words, and he chuckled softly to himself with a sound like water coming out of a bottle. It seemed an offer of life to me—a promise of everything the lack of which makes each day a torment to the man who has known clean comfort.

“Is it murder?” I asked him.

“Oh, my dear sir, you surprise me!” he cried, lifting his flabby hands. “What a horrible suggestion! Allow me to explain at once. Have you ever heard of Julius Craig?”

“The company promoter, who organized the Spanish mine swindle? Of course I have.”

“Did you know him by sight?”

“He used to come racing. A tall, thin, melancholy-looking fellow with a black beard—wasn’t he?”

“Yes, that is Julius Craig. He is now in the Princetown Prison with six more years to run. The climate of Dartmoor is not suited to his health. He is anxious to change his residence; nor do I blame him, Mr. Henderson, for it is the most desolate spot in all England. I am in a position to offer you the sum I have mentioned if you will arrange his escape. Do you agree?”

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"Yes," I told him.

"Ah, that is most satisfactory. To-morrow I will send you half the money with some little suggestions of my own as to your plan of campaign. The second half you will receive when Mr. Craig is free. By the way, there are some curious relics of the Stone Age on the moors. Perhaps you might read up the subject and appear at Princetown as a student; yes, Mr. Henderson, that will suit you well—a student of prehistoric man."

He chuckled until the carriage shook. It was like driving with a good-tempered blanc mange.

"I shall be glad of any advice you can give me," I said.

He pulled a cord, and when the carriage stopped I got out and stood waiting.

"Good night and good luck to you," he said, his great white face shining upon me from the window as he shook my hand. "I have your address. Drive on, Williams."

I might have been an old and trusted friend from the warmth of his manner. Yet as the carriage rolled away I noticed that he raised the little flap at the back to see that I didn't try to follow him.

The packet arrived next morning. The

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notes I stowed away in an inside pocket. The typewritten instructions were unsigned and undated.

According to them Craig was a member of gang "D," employed on the convict farm, in draining and inclosing a portion of moor by a stream known as the Black brook. Above the stream rose a small hill on which was an ancient cairn and stone circle that in my character as a student would offer an excuse for my presence.

Though communication with Craig could not be regularly established, he knew that an attempt was in preparation. The sight of a man in a white waterproof loitering on the cairn hill would be his signal that all was ready. Sudden fogs were frequent upon the moor, and when they came while the convicts were at work in the fields, the chance of escape was excellent; for the authorities did not chain their men, and the warders rarely used their rifles. They trusted to the huge moors upon which men who escaped were easily retaken, half dead from fatigue and starvation.

Craig would make a rush for the cairn hill. From thence it was my duty to convey him to Torquay thirty miles away on the coast.

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Once there, he would know where to go, and my responsibility ended. A letter to the Torquay Post Office, under the name of W. Slade, would be forwarded to the writer if I required further assistance or had any questions of real importance.

That was all ; but it was enough for me. Here was a scheme into which I could put my heart. There was no low-down swindling, no dirty work about it. I felt as gay as a schoolboy off for a holiday.

And so in three days' time that ragged rascal Jack Henderson disappeared from London, and the well dressed Mr. Abel Kingsley, vaguely described in the visitors' book of the Princetown Arms as of Memphis University, U.S.A., was sitting on the cairn hill above the great prison that held Julius Craig.

To the far horizon there stretched the melancholy moors, deserted wastes of rushy marshes and stunted heather, broken here and there by outcrops of granite, that crowned the rolling ground like the ruins of a hundred feudal castles. For Dartmoor is a huge granite tableland, and on its barren surface no corn will grow nor tree flourish.

Beneath the rampart of its containing hills

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lies the garden of Devon, a land of orchards and pleasant woods, of cornfields and pasture farms ; but the moors have defied the farmer and remain the same sad wilderness that prehistoric man inhabited four thousand years ago. You can see where he built his hut circles, and set up his great stone avenues to the honour of dead chieftains.

It was an uncanny sort of place altogether, and I shivered as I sat in that lonely cemetery of the forgotten dead.

The huge prison was built on the opposite slope of the shallow valley, and the farm which the convicts had won field by field stretched down from its walls to a brook at the foot of the cairn hill where I was. On the further edge of the brook a gang was at work inclosing some new ground, and through my glasses I soon made out the man I was after. The last time I had seen him was on his own coach at Ascot, with the girls buzzing round him like wasps after sugar, and there he was digging trenches with a spade. It's a funny world !

About twenty men were in the gang. On the outer side a couple of warders strolled up and down with rifles under their arms. There was nothing but a low hedge to stop

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the convicts if they knocked down the guards with their spades and make a run for it. But when I looked back across the wastes of the moor I understood. In a city a man may vanish in a crowd, but on Dartmoor he must tramp a dozen miles before he can find even a bush to hide him. In clear weather the mounted warders of the pursuit would ride him down in half an hour.

The Princetown Arms, a grey, weather-beaten square of granite, was a pleasant country inn standing near the centre of the village. It was too early in the year for tourists. Indeed, as I discovered, there was only one man beside myself staying in the house, a Mr. Thomas Hearne, whose address in the visitors' book was briefly London. When I came down to dinner that night I found him already seated at a little table with my knife and fork laid opposite. I wasn't anxious to make new acquaintances, but I couldn't very well ask them to lay another table for my benefit. So I took my chair, and wished him good evening as politely as possible.

He was a small, grey-bearded man of over sixty, as I reckoned, and he seemed as disinclined for conversation as ever I was.

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For that I thanked my luck, and worked through the dinner with my brain busy with one plan after another. It was just as coffee was served that he asked the question which startled me.

"The landlord tells me you are studying the stone remains on the moor," he said. "Is it your opinion that they're Neolithic or Druidical?"

I cursed the landlord under my breath. I had told him my story, but I had forgotten he might pass it on to others.

"The latter, undoubtedly," I said; though, if the truth be told, I had no opinion whatever.

"I cannot agree with you. They were here before ever the Druids came over the sea. May I ask what arguments you adduce in support of your theory?"

Everything I had read about those confounded stones slipped out of my mind in an instant. There was no good trying to bluff him, for he probably had the subject at his fingers' ends. So I nodded my head wisely, and suggested it was a bit too big a subject to start after dinner.

"I saw you by the cairn and circle above the Black brook this afternoon," he went on.

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"Is that to be the scene of your first investigations?"

"I have no definite plan at present," I said with a snap.

He took a long look at me and stopped his questions. I left the table as soon as I could do so decently, routed out the landlord, and engaged a private room. I had had enough of taking meals with a neolithic expert.

It was blowing hard next day, a fierce northwester that cleaned the clouds out of the sky like a sponge washes a slate.

Just after eleven I started out to make a further examination of the position. I wasn't such a fool as to march up to the cairn with old Hearne and a warder or two, as it might be, spying on me from another hillock, so I went down the high-road that lay as white and clear across the grey moor as a streak of paint, until I had left the place some distance behind me. No one, so far as I could see, was in sight, and presently I turned off the road along a disused cart track that seemed to lead in the direction I wanted. Its ancient ruts were filled with sprouting heather, and the short moor turf had covered up the hoof-marks with a velvet surface.

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I had walked a good quarter of a mile, when, rounding a curve of the hill, I found the old road explained in the ruins of a small farm, one of those melancholy memorials of a time when frozen meat was unknown, and it paid a man to breed cattle and sheep and cultivate a wheatfield or two, even on Dartmoor. The roof had fallen in, and the woodwork had been carried away, but the stone walls of the house and outbuildings still remained undefeated by a hundred years of storm. A weather-beaten cherry tree was pushing out its spring leafage before the door.

Leaving the farm, I began to climb the cairn hill, as I must call it for want of a better name, which sheltered the farm from the north and west.

It was rough walking, for the heather was set thick with granite boulders. At last I reached the top, skirted the mound set about with stones where the prehistoric chief lay sleeping—and very nearly stepped upon the body of that confounded old fellow, Thomas Hearne.

Luckily for me he never turned his head. The wind on the face of the hill was blowing in great gusts like the firing of a cannon, and my footsteps had been drowned in its thunder.

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I crept back behind a heap of tumbled rocks and dropped on my hands and knees, watching him through a convenient crevice. He lay flat on his chest, while he covered the gang at work in the new ground below with a small telescope.

It might be curiosity, of course, for many men regard a convict as something abnormal, something that is as pleasant to stare at as if he were the cannibal king at a fair. And yet that seemed a weak explanation. Was he in with the police? Had they got news that an attempt at rescue was to be made? If so, I stood the best chance in the world of finding myself in the county gaol within the week.

There was nothing to be gained by imagining bad luck. I walked back to the inn, and sat down to a study of the district with maps I had brought with me. There was only one railroad within many miles, and that was the single track that ran up from Plymouth to Princetown village. At the first signal that a convict had escaped the station would be full of warders; so that outlet was barred. South of the moor, fifteen miles away, ran another branch line ending at Ashburton. But I was determined to leave the railroad alone. The stations would be the first places to be

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watched by the police. Torquay, some thirty miles away, might easily be reached by a good horse and trap within the day. I could hire one for a month through the landlord, with the excuse that I wanted it for my exploring expeditions amongst the stone remains. It would surprise no one if it were seen off the roads with a luncheon-basket prominently displayed. So I decided, and welcomed dinner with enthusiasm.

I questioned the girl who brought the meal to my sitting-room as to old Hearne, but she could give me little information. He had arrived at the inn a couple of days before I appeared, and had spent most of his time in long walks on the moors. She thought he had a friend amongst the prison officials, for she had twice seen him coming out of the great gates down the street. That was all—and it left me more anxious about him than before. It was becoming very plain that before I took any decided step towards the escape, I must make sure of this man's business on the moors.

After dinner I walked into the inn bar to buy a smoke, and found Hearne with his back to the fire, talking to the landlord. As I entered, they both dropped into an uneasy

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silence. I was certain they had been discussing me, but I didn't want to let them know it, and so began to talk big about the scenery. I stayed down for about half an hour, and then allowed that I would get back to some writing I had to do.

"I'm glad you admire the moor, Mr. Kingsley," said the landlord, holding back the door for me. "Nothing quite like it in the States, I should think."

Upon my soul, I was as near as may be to owning I had never been there. But I remembered that I was Abel Kingsley, of Memphis, just in time.

"No," I said, "it's something quite unique."

"It's a wild place, sir," he went on. "Very wild and desolate. You should take a walk one night when the moon is full, as it is now. Then you would understand how the stories of ghost hounds and headless riders and devils in the mires first started. Mr. Hearne here is going to take my advice."

"To-night?" I asked, turning to the old fellow.

"No, Mr. Kingsley, I am too tired to think of it to-night," he said. "To-morrow or the next day, perhaps."

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I wished them a good evening and tramped up the stairs to my sitting-room, which looked over the moors at the back of the inn. It was certainly a splendid night, with a great searchlight of a moon drawing the strange tors—as they call the granite caps of the hills—in black silhouette upon the luminous skyline. I lit a pipe and sat there in the shadows, thinking, thinking. It was pleasant to be a decent man again, to wear clean linen and boots with real soles; to wash and shave and brush myself daily. I was back in my Eden days before the fall, when six hunters were in my stable, and men and women were glad to know Jack Henderson of Lowood Hall in the best of counties; yes, I was away from Princetown village in the midst of happy memories when I came to my senses with the sound of a soft tap-tapping under the window. There were tip-toe skulking footsteps on the gravel of the yard; Heaven knows but my ear had been well trained to such steps as those.

I crept softly to my window and peered out. The man was almost across the yard, moving in the shadow of the pig-sties. As he stopped at the wicket-gate that opened on to the moor, he turned his head to the moon. It was Hearne again.

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I decided on that instant. I slipped on my boots and ran down the stairs. The landlord was locking up for the night as I came to the front door.

"I'm going to take your advice," I said with a laugh.

"Very good, sir ; I will sit up for you."

"No, no, give me the key. Has Mr. Hearne gone to bed ? "

"Yes, sir, about ten minutes ago."

"His room is on the first floor, isn't it? "

"No, sir, he chose one on the ground floor. He preferred it."

The wiser man, thought I. He needed no door when he had but to open his window and step out.

When I got to the back of the inn Hearne was a good four hundred yards away, climbing a low ridge. As he disappeared over its edge I set off running at top speed, for I saw that in so broken and rugged a place I should have to keep close to his heels or I should lose him altogether. It was well I did so, for when I reached the crest of the rise he had vanished.

Presently, however, I caught sight of him again, walking very fast down a hollow at

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right angles to the line he first took. It led in the direction of the cairn hill.

It was hard work, that two miles' stalk across the moor. Sometimes I ran, sometimes crawled, sometimes lay flat on my chest with my head buried in the heather like an ostrich. Once I tried to cut a corner across what seemed a plot of level turf and struggled back, panting, from the grasp of the bog with the black slime almost to my waist. But I took great credit for my performance since the old man tramped steadily forward showing no sign of having seen me.

He did not climb the cairn hill as I had half expected, but skirted along the base until he came to the track which led to the ruined farm. Down this he walked quickly and passed through the doorway of the main building. I remained upon the slope of the hill, waiting for him to reappear. Five, ten minutes went by, and then my curiosity got the better of prudence. I determined to go down and see what he was about.

The place was sheltered from the gale, but I could hear it yelping and humming in the rocks above, while now and again a gust came curling up the valley, setting the heather whispering around me. I crept forward over

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the soft turf of the cart track, reached the gap where the door had been, hesitated, listened, and then stuck in my head.

I had been a boxer in my time, or that would have been the end of me. As I ducked, the heavy stick flicked off my cap and crashed into the wall with a nasty thud. I jumped back, and he came storming out through the doorway like a madman. I never saw more beastly fury in a man's eyes. I side-stepped, and he missed me again—it was a knife this time. Then I woke up, and let him have it with my right under the ear. He staggered, dropping his knife. As he stooped to pick it up, I jumped for him, and in ten seconds more was sitting on his chest, pegging out his arms on the turf. He tried a struggle or two; but he soon saw that I was far the stronger man, and so lay panting, with a hopeless despair in his face that, in a man of his age was shocking to witness. He had tried to kill me, but, on my honour, I felt sorry for him.

“Well, Mr. Hearne,” I said, “and what does this mean?”

“Too old,” he gasped. “Twenty years ago—different. How did you suspect? It was justice—nothing but bare justice, by Heaven!”

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"Now, what in the world do you think I am?" I asked him, in great surprise.

"A detective. You couldn't deceive me."

I got to my feet with a curse at the muddle I had made of it, and he sat up, staring at me as if he thought I had gone clean crazy of a sudden.

"I'm no detective," I said angrily, "though I was fool enough to believe you were one."

"Then why did you follow me to-night?" he asked, with a quick suspicion.

"Why did you try to kill me?" I said. "The truth is, Mr. Hearne, you and I are playing a risky game. Is it to be cards on the table, or are we to separate and say no more about it?"

He sat watching me for a time with a puzzled look. Plainly he was in great uncertainty of mind.

"Perhaps I have nothing to tell," he said at last.

"A man does not attempt to murder detectives unless he has a crime to conceal."

"That is true," he said, nodding his head; "very just and true."

There was nothing to be gained by a long bargaining of secrets with him. Whatever

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his business he could speedily discover mine if he chose. If I were honest with him he might return the confidence.

"I am arranging for the escape of Julius Craig, now doing his time in the prison yonder," I told him.

"Julius Craig!" he echoed, with wild eyes. "The escape of Julius Craig?"

"Yes. Do you know him?"

He burst into a scream of hysterical laughter, swaying his body to and fro, and pressing his hands to his sides as if trying to crush the uncanny merriment out of him; and then, before I guessed what he was about, the old fellow was upon me, with his arms about my neck in a mad embrace.

"Welcome, comrade," he cried. "I too have come to find a way out of Princetown Gaol for Julius Craig."

It took a good five minutes and a pull out of a flask to get him back to hard sense. Then he told me his story sitting on a fallen stone under the old cherry tree.

Craig was dearer to him than any brother, he said, with a burst of open sincerity. There was that between them that he could never forget while life remained to him. He had heard how the man was pining

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under prison discipline, and had come to help him escape if that were humanly possible. Of me or my London employers he knew nothing whatever.

He had been shown over the prison, having obtained a pass from an influential friend, and while there had learnt the place where Craig was daily employed. Yesterday from the cairn hill he had satisfied himself that the convict was working in the gang.

He had crept out this evening to examine the stream and hedge which divided the new enclosure from the moor. When he saw me on his track, his suspicions as to my business were confirmed. Either he must give up his project or my mouth must be stopped. So he tempted me into the ruined farm. The rest I knew.

He spoke in an easy, pleasant voice, with a perfect frankness and good humour. It never seemed to occur to him that he had done anything unreasonable, anything to which a level-headed man could object. I stared at him in a growing amazement.

There seemed, indeed, only one solution before me—that he had become partially insane.

“You must understand my position, Mr.

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Kingsley," he concluded. "I am not a lunatic ; but I have made up my mind in this matter of Julius Craig. Any one who is foolish enough to come between us must stand aside or take the consequences. Towards yourself, for example, I had no ill will. In fact, I rather liked you. But you must admit that, as a detective, your presence was excessively inconvenient. Now that I know the truth, I welcome you as a most valuable ally. I am prepared to trust you absolutely. Come, what are your plans ? "

I told him as we walked back to the inn. He expressed himself an admirer of their simplicity as we parted for the night. Mad or not I had found an assistant who would be of great help to me. So I let it stay at that and slept like a rock till nine next morning.

Matters moved quickly with us. I hired a stout horse and a two-wheeled cart for a month from the landlord to whom I talked neolithic man of an evening, impressing him with a learning, acquired from the reports of that worthy society the Devonshire Association. I preferred to drive myself, declining the boy offered for that purpose. There were no other preparations to make ; and so, on the day following, that earnest student, Mr.

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Abel Kingsley, might have been seen smoking his pipe on the cairn hill in a new white mackintosh, for was there not a threat of rain in the air? while Mr. Thomas Hearne lay hid amongst the stones watching the effect of the signal through his pocket telescope. He reported all well; Julius Craig had undoubtedly noticed the white waterproof and understood that we were waiting for him.

I could talk to you for an hour of our doings in the next three weeks. We lived on the edge of a powder-barrel in which we had set the fuse. Never a morning but we were up with the sun, staring to windward for signs of the weather. Would it be to-day, to-morrow—not at all? A nervous man would never have stood that strain; but we were not a neurotic couple, the old chap and I.

As hard and keen and clever as a lad of twenty-one was Thomas Hearne. It was he who spent the day in Plymouth, returning with a wig and long overcoat that might temporarily conceal the convict's identity until he could change his yellow prison uniform for the clothes I had already bought; it was he who gathered to himself all the weather lore of the village until he had become a better prophet than the wisest

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veteran of the moors. Two fogs we had, but during the first the convicts were kept within the walls; while before the other caught them the warders had time to rush the gangs back to their cells. Yet Hearne never lost temper at these delays, cheering me back into patience with the strength of his own certainty.

"Don't you worry, Kingsley," he would say; "what is fated to happen cannot be prevented, and Providence will see to it that Julius Craig comes to us soon."

His affection for the convict seemed to fill his life. No risk, no labour was too heavy; no storm would drive him from his post. Often when I was smoking by the inn fire, he was crouching patiently amongst the rocks on the cairn hill, as if it were his only son for whom he waited. There was something inhuman in his merciless self-sacrifice; but I had no reason to complain, for it lightened the burden on my shoulders.

It was at three o'clock on Tuesday, May 9th, that Julius Craig escaped. Poor devil! if he had but known!

Hearne and I had quarrelled that morning over the fog question. Perhaps both our tempers were wearing thin, but that was no

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excuse for his dropping from argument to insults. I dare say he thought my language just as bad ; but that didn't make the trouble any lighter. There was fog in the air, he said, though even the landlord laughed at the idea when I put the question to him. Finally, the old man walked off in a huff, though I had so far given way as to promise that I would bring the cart to the ruins by lunch-time.

I sulked about the inn until the papers came from Plymouth. When I had finished reading them it was nigh one o'clock. A leg of lamb was cooking in the kitchen. Just because Hearne preferred cold ham sandwiches on a draughty hill there was no reason why I should not have my meal in comfort. I would lunch before I started, and he could wait for his sandwiches.

It was a selfish thing to do, but he had irritated me that morning more than I now can understand. I was finishing off with cheese when the landlord thrust his head through the door of my sitting-room.

"I gave fool's wisdom this morning, sir," he said. "The fog be blowing up proper from the eastward. I'm feared that Mr. Hearne——"

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He got no further, for I was past him like a flash and out into the open.

The moors had gone; utterly vanished away. In their place there lay a blanket of billowy white that sent wild streamers upwards to the flying veil of clouds. Only a quarter mile of the main road was visible, and up it the first wave of the misty inundation was marching like a lofty wall. I ran towards the stable, cursing myself in my mad disappointment.

I galloped for two hundred yards, and then the fog gathered me to itself, and I had just enough sense to pull the horse to a slow trot.

I could still see the road for a dozen paces, but all sense of proportion and distance had gone from me. The fog was not stationary, but curled in broad confusing wreaths, or poured sideways upon me in avalanches of denser mist. Sometimes the cart was on the road, sometimes off it. Twice I nearly capsized. In the end I climbed down and went to the horse's head, leading it forward at the run. I made better progress after that.

Yet I was not more than half way to the cairn hill when from the whirling shadows to my left there came a sound that set my heart

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leaping in my breast. It was the muffled hud of a rifle.

I stopped, listening and staring into the mist. A second shot followed. And then, as if raised by these echoes, there clanged a distant bell, a deep voice of loud alarm from the prison tower, telling the moor that a convict had escaped, that Julius Craig was free, and that I—I, miserable fool that I was, had failed in the trust which had been placed upon me.

I tried not to think, but ran stubbornly on beside the horse with that infernal bell rioting in my ears. My life on the moors had put me in sound condition, and I never slackened my pace till I had trotted up the rise to where the track to the ruined farm began. I checked the horse and walked slowly forward studying the edge of the moor beside the highway for the mark of the grass-grown ruts I knew so well.

I heard the footsteps long before I saw him, a quick patter upon the hard surface behind me. As he came out of the fog he shouted, bringing his rifle to his hip with an easy swing. He was a stoutly built man in the neat dark uniform that marks the prison warder.

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"Be careful with that gun," I said; for he still had me covered.

"I beg your pardon, sir," he panted; "but we were close to him, and——"

"Close to whom?"

"There's a convict escaped," he explained. "You haven't seen him?"

"No, nor likely to in this weather."

He had got his breath by this time and stood leaning on his rifle, looking vaguely about him.

"You're right, sir. We stand a far better chance of losing ourselves than of finding him in a fog like this. But one thing is equally certain—he can't get far either."

It was while he spoke that I heard it—the clink of a boot striking a stone, and that not a score of yards away.

"I'm afraid you are only wasting time," I said, as carelessly as I was able. "A needle in a haystack is easy compared to a convict in a fog."

"I think I must take your advice, sir," he laughed.

We wished each other good afternoon, and he melted away as a man might slide behind a curtain. His footsteps died out down the road by which he had come as I moved forward.

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"That was a near thing, Kingsley," said a voice in the shadows, and I humbly thanked my luck as old Hearne stepped out upon the road.

"I've no excuse," I began. "It was all my fault, and——"

"Hush! keep quiet."

He stood for a moment listening like a dog at a door.

"If that fool of a warder had not gone back we were done," he whispered. "The guards chased us right into the ruins. While they searched them we slipped down the track. Come along, Craig, all's well."

The convict rose from the heather, where he had lain, and stumbled towards us. He was shaking like a man with the ague, and the sweat was running off his forehead and down his cheeks in narrow streaks.

"Am I safe," he stuttered, grabbing my arm. "I've money, man, money. You shall have it, I swear you shall have it all! But I won't go back there—not alive!"

"Come, pull yourself together," said Hearne, with a hand on his shoulder. "We have no time to waste, remember."

We wrapped the long coat over his yellow clothes, stuck the wig over his cropped head,

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and helped him to the front seat. I took my place beside him, Hearne clambered up behind, and our journey began.

The horse was of the old moor breed. He could have bowled us along at a good ten miles an hour if the fog had allowed it ; but as it was we rarely exceeded half that speed. It was a miserable time. Craig sat huddled by my side, now cursing me for the delay, now peering back along the road, while he implored us to tell him if it were galloping hoofs that he heard. He was an evil-tempered, petulant man, and I did not waste either politeness or sympathy upon him. It was not until we had passed over some miles of rolling uplands and dropped down a steep descent to a moss-grown bridge, that the fog showed signs of breaking. As we strained up the opposing hill it began to tear away in flying wisps like the smoke of great guns, giving us glimpses of a narrow slope of turf ending in a cliff, at the foot of which an unseen river moaned and chuckled.

"I helped you loyally—you have no complaint against me?" asked old Hearne, tapping me suddenly on the shoulder.

"I could never wish a better comrade," I told him.

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"That is how I hope you will always think of me."

He was not a kind of man to talk sentiment, and I glanced back in surprise. There was an expression of peace upon him, such as I have never seen in a human countenance either before or since. He smiled, and, reaching over, gave my hand a squeeze.

"You have the making of a good fellow in you," he said. "May the fates forget your follies."

We drove on in silence for a while, and then the old man rose, kneeling upon the cushions of the back seat.

"Here comes the sun, Julius Craig," he said. "The mists are scattering, and the world comes peeping through to welcome you back to freedom. Women and wine and cards—does the old spirit stir within you?"

"And who the devil may you be?" asked the convict, turning upon him.

"Have five years changed me so much? Perhaps my beard is whiter than it was the night you fled with her to the yacht in Cadiz Bay."

The convict gave a miserable cry, like a

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beast in pain, shrinking back, with his face one grey mask of fear.

"Not Mortimer?" he whispered. "It can't be Mortimer. He died."

"You are quite mistaken," said Hearne, politely.

It all happened very swiftly—in one long breath or so, it seemed to me. Craig sprang from his seat and ran wildly down the slope; but the old man was not five yards behind him. I believe that the convict had the pace of him, but the cliff turned Craig to the right, and the next moment they had closed, and hung, swaying, upon the edge.

The flicker of a knife, a shrill, piping cry, and they were gone.

I was alone in a great silence save for the faint murmurs of the stream as it fought the rocks below.

It took me ten minutes and more to reach them, for I had to skirt the cliff until a slide of granite boulders gave me a path to the bottom. Craig was dead, the knife had done its work; but the old man was alive, though his grave blue eyes were glazing fast. He recognized me, and smiled very, very faintly. I raised his head upon my arm, and wiped his wrinkled face with my handkerchief.

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"Is he dead?"

"Yes," I told him.

"I was—manager of a mine—in Spain," he whispered. "My daughter—he took her to his yacht—scoundrel was married already—she died in London."

There was no vengeance in his face now; he faltered on as simply as a little child.

"Long search—found he was in prison—came to kill him. I met you—to help him escape seemed a better way. Then he would know why he had to die—if I had shot him over hedge he would—never have understood—sorry for you—had to do my duty—by him."

His head fell back with a long sigh, so that I thought all was over; but presently he rallied again, in the last blind effort at life which even a man with a broken back will make.

"Not a sin, Mary dear," he called. "How can they tell you it was murder when they know——"

He finished his explanation in another world.

That is about all I need tell you. I found the horse grazing by the roadside and drove to Ashburton with no great care whether they

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caught me or not. Yet I was back in London before they found the bodies.

* * * * *

So ended the story of John Henderson as Inspector Peace told it to me.

"And you?" I asked.

"I suspected that 'Kingsley' had helped in the escape, but I never identified him with Jack Henderson. Who Thomas Hearne might be or why he killed the convict I could never find out. So I failed, but I don't know that I am ashamed of it, all things considered."

"Did Henderson die in hospital?"

"No; they pulled him round. Some old friends found him a place in some racing stables. He is there now."

"He had broken several sorts of laws," I suggested. "When he recovered didn't you——"

"No, I didn't," said the inspector, firmly. "I let him go free—and without straining my conscience either."

VI

THE VANISHED MILLIONAIRE

VI

THE VANISHED MILLIONAIRE

I stood with my back to the fire, smoking and puzzling over it. It was worth all the headlines the newspapers had given it; there was no loophole to the mystery.

Both sides of the Atlantic knew Silas J. Ford. He had established a business reputation in America that had made him a celebrity in England from the day he stepped off the liner. Once in London his syndicates and companies and consolidations had startled the slow-moving British mind. The commercial sky of the United Kingdom was overshadowed by him and his schemes. The papers were full of praise and blame, of puffs and denunciations. He was a millionaire; he was on the verge of a smash that would paralyze the markets of the world. He was an abstainer, a drunkard, a gambler, a most religious man. He was a confirmed bachelor, a woman hater;

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his engagement was to be announced shortly. So was the gossip kept rolling with the lime-light always centred upon the spot where Silas J. Ford happened to be standing.

And now he had disappeared, vanished, evaporated.

On the night of December 18th, a Thursday, he had left London for Meudon Hall, the fine old Hampshire mansion that he had rented from Lord Beverley. The two most trusted men in his office accompanied him. Friday morning he had spent with them; but at three o'clock the pair had returned to London, leaving their chief behind. From four to seven he had been shut up with his secretary. It was a hard time for every one, a time verging upon panic, and at such times Silas J. Ford was not an idle man.

At eight o'clock he had dined. His one recreation was music, and after the meal he had played the organ in the picture-gallery for an hour. At a quarter past eleven he retired to his bedroom, dismissing Jackson, his body servant, for the night. Three-quarters of an hour later, however, Harbord, his secretary, had been called to the private telephone, for Mr. Ford had brought an extension wire from the neighbouring town of

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Camdon. It was a London message, and so urgent that he decided to wake his chief. There was no answer to his knock, and on entering the room he found that Mr. Ford was not in bed. He was surprised, but in no way suspicious, and started to search the house. He was joined by a footman, and, a little later, by Jackson and the butler. Astonishment changed to alarm. Other servants were roused to aid in the quest. Finally, a party, provided with lanterns from the stables, commenced to examine the grounds.

Snow had fallen early in the day, covering the great lawns in front of the entrance porch with a soft white blanket, about an inch in thickness. It was the head-groom who struck the trail. Apparently Mr. Ford had walked out of the porch, and so over the drive and across the lawn towards the wall that bounded the public road. This road, which led from Meudon village to the town of Camdon, crossed the front of Meudon Hall at a distance of some quarter of a mile.

There was no doubt as to the identity of the footprints, for Silas Ford affected a broad, square-toed boot, easily recognizable from its unusual impression.

They tracked him by their lanterns to the

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park wall, and there all trace of him disappeared. The wall was of rough stone, easily surmountable by an active man. The snow that covered the road outside had been churned into muddy paste by the traffic of the day; there were no further footprints observable.

The party returned to the house in great bewilderment. The telephone to London brought no explanation, and the following morning Mr. Harbord caught the first train to town to make inquiries. For private reasons his friends did not desire publicity for the affair, and it was not until the late afternoon, when all their investigations had proved fruitless, that they communicated with Scotland Yard. When the papers went to press the whereabouts of the great Mr. Ford still remained a mystery.

In keen curiosity I set off up the stairs to Inspector Peace's room. Perhaps the little detective had later news to give me.

I found him standing with his back to the fire puffing at his cigarette with a plump solemnity. A bag, neatly strapped, lay on the rug at his feet. He nodded a welcome, watching me over his glasses.

"I expected you, Mr. Phillips," he said.
"And how do you explain it?"

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"A love affair or temporary insanity," I suggested vaguely.

"Surely we can combine those solutions," he smiled. "Anything else?"

"No. I came to ask your opinion."

"My mind is void of theories, Mr. Phillips, and I shall endeavour to keep it so for the present. If you wish to amuse yourself by discussing possibilities, I would suggest your consideration of the reason why, if he wanted to disappear quietly, he should leave so obvious a track through the snow of his own lawn. For myself, as I am leaving for Camdon *viâ* Waterloo Station in twenty-three minutes, I shall hope for more definite data before night."

"Peace," I asked him eagerly, "may I come with you?"

"If you can be ready in time," he said.

It was past two o'clock when we arrived at the old town of Camdon. A carriage met us at the station. Five minutes more and we were clear of the narrow streets and climbing the first bare ridge of the downs. It was a desolate prospect enough—a bare expanse of wind-swept land that rose and fell with the sweeping regularity of the Pacific swell. Here and there a clump of ragged firs showed black against the snow. Under that gentle

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carpet the crisp turf of the crests and the broad plough lands of the lower ground alike lay hidden. I shivered, drawing my coat more closely about me.

It was half an hour later that we topped a swelling rise and saw the grey towers of the ancient mansion beneath us. In the shelter of the valley by the quiet river, that now lay frozen into silence, the trees had grown into splendid woodlands, circling the hall on the further side. From the broad front the white lawns crept down to the road on which we were driving. Dark masses of shrubberies and the tracery of scattered trees broke their silent levels. The park wall that fenced them from the road stood out like an ink line ruled upon paper.

"It must have been there that he disappeared," I cried, with a speculative finger.

"So I imagine," said Peace. "And if he has spent two nights on the Hampshire downs, he will be looking for a fire to-day. You have rather more than your fair share of the rug, Mr. Phillips, if you will excuse my mentioning it."

A man was standing on the steps of the entrance porch when we drove up. As we unrolled ourselves he stepped forward to help

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us. He was a thin, pale-faced fellow, with fair hair and indeterminate eyes.

"My name is Harbord," he said. "You are Inspector Addington Peace, I believe."

His hand shook as he stretched it out in a tremulous greeting. Plainly the secretary was afraid, visibly and anxiously afraid.

"Mr. Ransom, the manager of Mr. Ford's London office, is here," he continued. "He is waiting to see you in the library."

We followed him through a great hall into a room lined with books from floor to ceiling. A stout, dark man, who was pacing it like a beast in a cage, stopped at the sight of us. His face, as he turned, looked pinched and grey in the full light.

"Inspector Peace, eh?" he said. "Well, Inspector, if you want a reward name it. If you want to pull the house down only say the word. But find him for us, or, by Heaven, we're done."

"Is it as bad as that?"

"You can keep a secret, I suppose. Yes—it couldn't well be worse. It was a tricky time; he hid half his schemes in his own head; he never trusted even me altogether. If he were dead I could plan something, but now——"

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He thumped his hand on the table and turned away to the window.

"When you last saw Mr. Ford was he in good health? Did he stand the strain?"

"Ford had no nerves. He was never better in his life."

"In these great transactions he would have his enemies. If his plans succeeded there would be many hard hit, perhaps ruined. Have you any suspicion of a man who, to save himself, might make away with Mr. Ford?"

"No," said the manager, after a moment's thought. "No, I cannot give you a single name. The players are all big men, Inspector. I don't say that their consciences would stop them from trying such a trick, but it wouldn't be worth their while. They hold off when gaol is the certain punishment."

"Was this financial crisis in his own affairs generally known?"

"Certainly not."

"Who would know of it?"

"There might be a dozen men on both sides of the Atlantic who would suspect the truth. But I don't suppose that more than four people were actually in possession of the facts."

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"And who would they be?"

"His two partners in America; myself, and Mr. Harbord there."

Peace turned to the young man with a smile and a polite bow.

"Can you add any names to the list?" he asked.

"No," said Harbord, staring at the detective with a puzzled look, as if trying to catch the drift of his questions.

"Thank you," said the inspector; "and now, will you show me the place where this curious disappearance occurred?"

We crossed the drive, where the snow lay torn and trampled by the carriages, and so to the white, even surface of the lawn. We soon struck the trail, a confused path beaten by many footprints. Peace stooped for a moment, and then turned to the secretary with an angry glance.

"Were you with them?" he said.

"Yes."

"Then why, in the name of common sense, didn't you keep them off his tracks? You have simply trampled them out of existence, between you."

"We were in a hurry, Inspector," said the secretary, meekly. "We didn't think about it."

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We walked forward, following the broad trail until we came to a circular patch of trodden snow. Evidently the searchers had stopped and stood talking together. On the further side I saw the footprints of a man plainly defined. There were some half-dozen clear impressions and they ended at the base of the old wall, which was some six feet in height.

"I am glad to see that you and your friends have left me something, Mr. Harbord," said the inspector.

He stepped forward and, kneeling down, examined the nearest footprint.

"Mr. Ford dressed for dinner?" he inquired, glancing up at the secretary.

"Certainly! Why do you ask?"

"Merely that he had on heavy shooting boots when he took this evening stroll. It will be interesting to discover what clothes he wore."

The inspector walked up to the wall, moving parallel to the tracks in the snow. With a sudden spring he climbed to the top and seated himself while he stared about him. Then on his hands and knees he began to crawl forward along the coping. It was a quaint spectacle, but the extraordinary care

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and vigilance of the little man took the farce out of it.

Presently he stopped and looked down at us.

"Please stay where you are," he said, and disappeared on the further side.

Harbord offered me a cigarette, and we waited with due obedience till the inspector's bullet head again broke the horizon as he struggled back to his position on the coping of the wall.

He seemed in a very pleasant temper when he joined us; but he said nothing of his discoveries, and I had grown too wise to inquire. When we reached the entrance hall he asked for Jackson, the valet, and in a couple of minutes the man appeared. He was a tall, hatchet-faced fellow, very neatly dressed in black. He made a little bow, and then stood watching us in a most respectful attitude.

"A queer business this, Jackson," said Addington Peace.

"Yes, sir."

"And what is your opinion on it?"

"To be frank, sir, I thought at first that Mr. Ford had run away; but now I don't know what to make of it."

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“ And why should he run away ? ”

“ I have no idea, sir ; but he seemed to me rather strange in his manner yesterday.”

“ Have you been with him long ? ”

“ No, sir. I was valet to the Honourable John Dorn, Lord Beverley’s second son. Mr. Ford took me from Mr. Dorn at the time he rented the Hall.”

“ I see. And now, will you show me your master’s room. I shall see you again later, Mr. Harbord,” he continued ; “ in the mean while I will leave my assistant with you.”

We sat and smoked in the secretary’s room. He was not much of a talker, consuming cigarette after cigarette in silence. The winter dusk had already fallen when the inspector joined us, and we retired to our rooms to prepare for dinner. I tried a word with Peace upon the staircase, but he shook his head and walked on.

The meal dragged itself to an end somehow, and we left Ransom with a second decanter of port before him. Peace slipped away again, and I consoled myself with a book in the library until half-past ten, when I walked off to bed. A servant was switching off the light in the hall when I mounted the great staircase.

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My room was in the old wing at the further side of the picture-gallery, and I had some difficulty in steering my way through the dark corridors. The mystery that hung over the house had shaken my nerves, and I remember that I started at every creak of a board and peered into the shadows as I passed along with Heaven knows what ghostly expectations. I was glad enough to close my door upon them and see the wood fire blazing cheerfully in the open hearth.

* * * * *

I woke with a start that left me sitting up in bed, with my heart thumping in my ribs like a piston-rod. I am not generally a light sleeper, but that night, even while I snored, my nerves were active. Some one had tapped at my door—that was my impression.

I listened with the uncertain fear that comes to the newly waked. Then I heard it again—on the wall near my head this time. A board creaked. Some one was groping his way down the dark corridor without. Presently he stopped, and a faint line of illumination sprang out under my door. It winked, and then grew still. He had lit a candle.

Assurance came with the streak of light.

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What was he doing, groping in the dark, if he had a candle with him? I crept over to the door, opened it, and stared cautiously out.

About a score feet away a man was standing—a striking figure against the light he carried. His back was towards me, but I could see that his hand was shading the candle from his eyes while he stared into the shadows that clung about the further end of the corridor.

Presently he began to move forward.

The picture-gallery and the body of the house lay behind me. The corridor in which he stood terminated in a window, set deep into the stone of the old walls. The man walked slowly, throwing the light to right and left. His attitude was of nervous expectation—that of a man who looked for something that he feared to see.

At the window he stopped, staring about him and listening. He examined the fastenings, and then tried a door on his right. It was locked against him. As he did so I caught his profile against the light. It was Harbord, the secretary. From where I stood he was not more than forty feet away. There was no possibility of a mistake.

As he turned to come back I retreated into

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my room, closing the door. The fellow was in a state of great agitation, and I could hear him muttering to himself as he walked. When he had passed by I peeped out to see him and his light dwindle, reach the corner by the picture-gallery, and fade into a reflection—a darkness.

I took care to turn the key before I got back into bed.

I woke again at seven, and, hurrying on my clothes, set off to tell Peace all about it. I took him to the place, and together we examined the corridor. There were only two rooms beyond mine. The one on the left was an unoccupied bedroom; that on the right was a large store-room, the door of which was locked. The housekeeper kept the key, we learnt upon inquiry. Whom had Harbord followed? The problem was beyond me. As for Inspector Peace, he did not indulge in verbal speculations.

It was in the central hall that we encountered the secretary on his way to the breakfast-room. The man looked nervous and depressed; he nodded to us, and was passing on, when Peace stopped him.

“Good morning, Mr. Harbord,” he said.
“Can I have a word with you?”

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"Certainly, Inspector. What is it?"

"I have a favour to ask. My assistant and myself have our hands full here. If necessary could you help us by running up to London, and——"

"For the day?" he interrupted.

"No. It may be an affair of three or four days."

"Then I must refuse. I am sorry, but——"

"Don't apologize, Mr. Harbord," said the little man, cheerfully. "I shall have to find some one else—that is all."

We walked into the breakfast-room, and a few minutes later Ransom appeared with a great bundle of letters and telegrams in his hand. He said not a word to any of us, but dropped into a chair, tearing open the envelopes and glancing at their contents. His face grew darker as he read, and once he thumped his hand upon the table with a crash that set the china jingling.

"Well, Inspector?" he said at last.

The little detective's head shook out a negative.

"Perhaps you require an incentive," he sneered. "Is it a matter of a reward?"

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"No, Mr. Ransom; but it is becoming one of my personal reputation."

"Then, by thunder! you are in danger of losing it. Why don't you and your friend hustle, instead of loitering around as if you were paid by the day? I tell you, man, there are thousands—hundreds of thousands—melt-ing, slipping through our fingers, every hour, every hour."

He sprang from his seat and started his walk again—up and down, up and down, as we had first seen him.

"Shall you be returning to London?"

At the question the manager halted in his stride, staring sharply down into the inspector's bland countenance.

"No," he said; "I shall stay here, Mr. Addington Peace, until such time as you have something definite to tell me."

"I have an inquiry to make which I would rather place in the hands of some one who has personal knowledge of Mr. Ford. Neither Mr. Harbord nor yourself desire to leave Meudon. Is there any one else you can suggest?"

"There is Jackson—Ford's valet," said the manager, after a moment's thought. "He can go, if you think him bright enough. I'll send for him."

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While the footman who answered the bell was gone upon his errand, we waited in an uneasy silence. There was the shadow of an ugly mystery upon us all. Jackson, as he entered, was the only one who seemed at his ease. He stood there—a tall figure of all the respectabilities.

“The inspector here wishes you to go to London, Jackson,” said the manager. “He will explain the details. There is a fast train from Camdon at eleven.”

“Certainly, sir. Do I return to-night?”

“No, Jackson,” said Peace. “It will take a day or two.”

The man took a couple of steps towards the door, hesitated, and then returned to his former place.

“I beg your pardon, sir,” he began, addressing Ransom. But I would rather remain at Meudon under present circumstances.”

“What on earth do you mean?” thundered the manager.

“Well, sir, I was the last to see Mr. Ford. There is, as it were, a suspicion upon me. I should like to be present while the search continues, both for his sake—and my own.”

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"Very kind of you, I'm sure," growled Ransom. "But you either do what I tell you, Jackson, or you pack your boxes and clear out. So be quick and make up your mind."

"I think you are treating me most unfairly, sir. But I cannot be persuaded out of what I know to be my duty."

"You impertinent rascal!" began the furious manager. But Peace was already on his feet with a hand outstretched.

"Perhaps, after all, I can make other arrangements, Mr. Ransom," he said. "It is natural that Jackson should consider his own reputation in this affair. That is all, Jackson; you may go now."

It was half an hour afterwards, when the end of breakfast had dispersed the party, that I spoke to Peace about it, offering to go to London myself and do my best to carry out his instructions.

"I had bad luck in my call for volunteers," he said.

"I should have thought they would have been glad enough to get the chance of work. They can find no particular amusement in loafing about the place all day."

"Doubtless they all had excellent

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reasons," he said with a smile. "But, anyway, you cannot be spared, Mr. Phillips."

"You flatter me."

"I want you to stay in your bedroom. Write, read, do what you like, but keep your door ajar. If any one passes down the corridor, see where he goes, only don't let him know that you are watching him if you can help it. I will take my turn at half-past one. I don't mean to starve you."

I obeyed. After all, it was, in a manner, promotion that the inspector had given me; yet it was a tedious, anxious time. No one came my way, barring a sour-looking housemaid. I tried to argue out the case, but the deeper I got the more conflicting grew my theories. I was never more glad to see a friendly face than when the little man came in upon me.

The short winter's afternoon crept on, the inspector and I taking turn and turn about in our sentry duty. Dinner-time came and went. I had been off duty from nine, but at ten-thirty I poured out a whisky and soda and went back to join him. He was sitting in the middle of the room smoking a pipe in great apparent satisfaction.

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"Bed-time, isn't it?" I grumbled, sniffing at his strong tobacco.

"Oh no," he said. "The fact is, we are going to sit up all night."

I threw myself on a couch by the window without reply. Perhaps I was not in the best of tempers; certainly I did not feel so.

"You insisted on coming down with me," he suggested.

"I know all about that," I told him. "I haven't complained, have I? If you want me to shut myself up for a week I'll do it; but I should prefer to have some idea of the reason why."

"I don't wish to create mysteries, Mr. Phillips," he said kindly; "but, believe me, there is nothing to be gained in vague discussions."

I know that settled it as far as he was concerned, so I nodded my head and filled a pipe. At eleven he walked across the room and switched off the light.

"If nothing happens, you can take your turn in four hours from now," he said. "In the meanwhile get to sleep. I will keep the first watch."

I shut my eyes; but there was no rest in

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me that night. I lay listening to the silence of the old house with a dull speculation. Somewhere far down in the lower floor a great gong-like clock chimed the hours and quarters. I heard them every one, from twelve to one, from one to two. Peace had stopped smoking. He sat as silent as a cat at a mousehole.

It must have been some fifteen minutes after two that I heard the faint, faint creak of a board in the corridor outside. I sat up, every nerve strung to a tense alertness. And then there came a sound I knew well, the soft drawing touch of a hand groping in the darkness as some one felt his way along the panelled walls. It passed us and was gone. Yet Peace never moved. Could he have fallen asleep? I whispered his name.

“Hush !”

The answer came to me like a gentle sigh.

One minute, two minutes more and the room sprang into sight under the glow of an electric hand-lamp. The inspector rose from his seat and slid through the door, with me upon his heels. The light he carried searched the clustered shadows ; but the corridor was empty, nor was there any place where a man might hide.

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"You waited too long," I whispered impatiently.

"The man is no fool, Mr. Phillips. Do you imagine that he was not listening and staring like a hunted beast. A noisy board, a stumble, or a flash of light, and we should have wasted a tiring day."

"Nevertheless he has got clear away."

"I think not."

As we crept forward I saw that a strip of the oak flooring along the walls was grey with dust. If it had been in such a neglected state in the afternoon I should surely have noticed it. In some curiosity I stooped to examine the phenomenon.

"Flour," whispered the little man, touching my shoulder.

"Flour?"

"Yes. I sprinkled it myself. Look—there is the first result."

He steadied his light as he spoke, pointing with his other hand. On the powdery surface was the half footprint of a man.

The flour did not extend more than a couple of feet from the walls, so that it was only here and there that we caught up the trail. We had passed the bedroom on the left—yet the footprints still went on; we

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were at the store-room door, yet they still were visible before us. There was no other egress from the corridor. The tall window at the end was, as I knew, a good twenty feet from the ground. Had this man also vanished off the earth like Silas Ford?

Suddenly the inspector stopped, grasping my arm. The light he held fell upon two footprints set close together. They were at right angles to the passage. Apparently the man had passed into the solid wall!

"Peace, what does this mean?"

You, sir, sitting peaceably at home, with a good light and an easy conscience, may think I was a timid fool; yet I was afraid — honestly and openly afraid. The little detective heard the news of it in my voice, for he gave me a reassuring pat upon the back.

"Have you never heard of a 'priest's hole?'" he whispered. "In the days when Meudon Hall was built, no country-house was without its hiding-place. Protestants and priests, Royalists and Republicans, they all used the secret burrow at one time or another."

"How did he get in?"

"That is what we are here to discover;

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and as I have no wish to destroy Mr. Ford's old oak panels I think our simplest plan will be to wait until he comes back again."

The shadows leapt upon us as Peace extinguished the light he carried. The great window alone was luminous with the faint starlight that showed the tracery of its ancient stonework; for the rest, the darkness hedged us about in impenetrable barriers. Side by side, we stood by the wall in which we knew the secret entrance must exist.

It may have been ten minutes or more when from the distance—somewhere below our feet, or so it seemed to me—there came the faint echo of a closing door. It was only in such cold silence that we could have heard it. The time ticked on. Suddenly, upon the black of the floor, there shone a thin reflection like the slash of a sword—a reflection that grew into a broad gush of light as the sliding panel in the wall, six feet from where we stood, rose to the full opening. There followed another pause, during which I could see Peace draw himself together as if for some unusual exertion.

A shadow darkened the reflection on the floor, and a head came peering out. The light but half displayed the face, but I could

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see that the teeth were bare and glistening, like those of a man in some deadly expectation. The next moment he stepped across the threshold.

With a spring like the rush of a terrier, Addington Peace was upon him, driving him off his balance with the impact of the blow. One loud scream he gave that went echoing away into the distant corridors. But, before I could reach them, the little detective had him down, though he still kicked viciously until I lent a hand. The click of the handcuffs on his wrists ended the matter.

It was Ford's valet, the man Jackson.

We were not long by ourselves. I heard a quick patter of naked feet from behind us, and Harbord, the secretary, came running up, swinging a heavy stick in his hand. Ransom followed close at his heels. They both stopped at the edge of the patch of light in which we were, staring from us to the gaping hole in the wall.

"What in thunder are you about?" cried the manager.

"Finding a solution to your problem," said the little detective, getting to his feet. "Perhaps, gentlemen, you will be good enough to follow me."

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He stepped through the opening in the wall, and lifted the candle which the valet had placed on the floor whilst he was raising the panel from within. By its light I could see the first steps of a flight which led down into darkness.

"We will take Jackson with us," he continued. "Keep an eye on him, Mr. Phillips, if you please."

It was a strange procession that we made. First Peace, with the candle, then Ransom, with the valet following, while I and Harbord brought up the rear. We descended some thirty steps, formed in the thickness of the wall, opened a heavy door, and so found ourselves in a narrow chamber, some twelve feet long by seven broad. Upon a mattress at the further end lay a man, gagged and bound. As the light fell upon his features, Ransom sprang forward, shouting his name.

"Silas Ford, by thunder!"

With eager fingers we loosened the gag and cut the ropes that bound his wrists. He sat up, turning his long, thin face from one to the other of us as he stretched the cramp from his limbs.

"Thank you, gentlemen," said he. "Well, Ransom, how are things?"

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"Bad, sir ; but it's not too late."

He nodded his head, passing his hands through his hair with a quick, nervous movement.

"You've caught my clever friend, I see. Kindly go through his pockets, will you? He has something I must ask him to return to me."

We found it in Jackson's pocket-book—a cheque, antedated a week, for five thousand pounds, with a covering letter to the manager of the bank. Ford took the bit of stamped paper, twisting it to and fro in his supple fingers.

"It was smart of you, Jackson," he said, addressing the bowed figure before him. "I give you credit for the idea. To kidnap a man just as he was bringing off a big deal—well, you would have earned the money."

"But how did you get down here?" struck in the manager.

"He told me that he had discovered an old hiding-place—a 'priest's hole' he called it, and I walked into the trap as the best man may do sometimes. As we got to the bottom of that stairway he slipped a sack over my head, and had me fixed in thirty seconds. He fed me himself twice a day, standing by to see

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I didn't holloa. When I paid up he was to have twenty-four hours' start; then he would let you know where I was. I held out awhile, but I gave in to-night. The delay was getting too dangerous. Have you a cigarette, Harbord? Thank you. And who may you be?"

It was to the detective he spoke.

"My name is Peace, Inspector Addington Peace, from Scotland Yard."

"And I owe my rescue to you?"

The little man bowed.

"You will have no reason to regret it. And what did they think had become of me, Inspector?"

"It was the general opinion that you had taken to yourself wings, Mr. Ford."

* * * * *

It was as we travelled up to town next day that Peace told me his story. I will set it down as briefly as may be.

"I soon came to the conclusion that Ford, whether dead or alive, was inside the grounds of Meudon Hall. If he had bolted, for some reason, by-the-way, which was perfectly incomprehensible, a man of his ability would not have left a broad trail across the centre of his lawn for all to see. There was, moreover, no trace of him that our men could ferret out

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at any station within reasonable distance. A motor was possible, but there were no marks of its presence next morning in the slush of the roads. That fact I learnt from a curious groom who had aided in the search, and who, with a similar idea upon him, had carefully examined the highway at daybreak.

“When I clambered to the top of the wall I found that the snow upon the coping had been dislodged. I traced the marks, as you saw, for about a dozen yards. Where they ended I, too, dropped to the ground outside. There I made a remarkable discovery. Upon a little drift of snow that lay in the shallow ditch beneath were more footprints. But they were not those of Ford. They were the marks of long and narrow boots, and led into the road, where they were lost in the track of a flock of sheep that had been driven over it the day before.

“I took a careful measurement of those footprints. They might, of course, belong to some private investigator; but they gave me an idea. Could some man have walked across the lawn in Ford’s boots, changed them to his own on the top of the wall, and so departed? Was it the desire of some one to let it be supposed that Ford had run away?

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"When I examined Ford's private rooms I was even more fortunate. From the boot-boy I discovered that the master had three pairs of shooting-boots. There were three pairs in the stand. Some one had made a very serious mistake. Instead of hiding the pair he had used on the lawn, he had returned them to their place. The trick was becoming evident. But where was Ford? In the house or grounds, dead or alive, but where?

"I was able, through my friend the boot-boy, to examine the boots on the night of our arrival. My measurements corresponded with those that Jackson, the valet, wore. Was he acting for himself, or was Harbord, or even Ransom, in the secret? That, too, it was necessary to discover before I showed my hand.

"Your story of Harbord's midnight excursion supplied a clue. The secretary had evidently followed some man who had disappeared mysteriously. Could there be the entrance to a secret chamber in that corridor? That would explain the mystification of Harbord as well as the disappearance of Silas Ford. If so Harbord was not involved.

"If Ford were held a prisoner he must be fed. His gaoler must of necessity remain in

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the house. But the trap I set in the suggested journey to town was an experiment singularly unsuccessful, for all the three men I desired to test refused. However, if I were right about the secret chamber I could checkmate the blackmailer by keeping a watch on him from your room, which commanded the line of communications. But Jackson was clever enough to leave his victualling to the night-time. I scattered the flour to try the result of that ancient trick. It was successful. That is all. Do you follow me?"

"Yes," said I; "but how did Jackson come to know the secret hiding-place?"

"He has long been a servant of the house. You had better ask his old master."

VII

MR. CORAN'S ELECTION

VII

MR. CORAN'S ELECTION

TEN o'clock! Big Ben left no doubt about it; for the giant clock in the tower of the Houses of Parliament is a noisy neighbour. The last stroke thundered out as I climbed the stairs that led to the modest lodging of Inspector Addington Peace, and silence had fallen as I knocked at his door. I was alone that night and in the mood when a man escapes from himself to seek a friend.

I found the little detective at his open window, staring across the tumbled roofs to where the Abbey towers rose under the summer moon. The evening breeze that came creeping up with the tide blew gratefully after the heat of the July day. He glanced at me over his shoulder with a short nod of welcome.

"Even the police grow sentimental on such a night," I suggested.

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“Or philosophic.”

“‘The reflections of Diogenes the detective, or the Aristotle of Scotland Yard,’” I laughed. “May I inquire as to the cause of such profound thought?”

He held out a slip of paper, which I took and carried to the central lamp. It was an old newspaper clipping, stained and blurred, relating in six lines how James Coran, described as a student, had been charged at the Bow Street Police-court with drunkenness, followed by an aggravated assault on the constable who arrested him. He was fined three pounds or seven days. That was all.

“Not a subject of earth-shaking importance,” I said.

“No; but it has proved a sufficient excuse for blackmail.”

“Then the victim is a fool,” I answered hotly. “Why, from the look of the paper, the affair must have taken place a dozen years ago.”

“Thirty-two years this month.”

“Which means that the riotous student is now a man of over fifty. If James Coran has gone down the hill, the past can’t hurt him now; if he has led a respectable life, surely he can afford to neglect the scamp who threatens

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to rake up so mild a scandal. Blackmail for a spree back in the seventies—it's ridiculous, Inspector."

The little man stood with his hands behind him and his head on one side, watching me with benevolent amusement. When he spoke it was in the ponderous manner which he sometimes assumed, a manner that always reminded me of a university professor explaining their deplorable errors to his class.

"Mr. James Coran is a respectable middle-class widower who lives with his sister Rebecca and two daughters in the little town of Brendon, twenty-four miles from London. He arrives at the 'Fashionable Clothing Company'—his London establishment in Oxford Street—at ten o'clock in the morning, leaving for home by the 5.18. In his spare time he performs a variety of public duties at Brendon. He is a recognized authority on drains, and has produced a pamphlet on dust-carts. As a temperance orator his local reputation is great, and his labours in the cause of various benevolent associations have been suitably commemorated by a presentation clock, three inkstands, and a silver salver. His interests are limited to Brendon and Oxford Street ;

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of world movements he thinks no more than the caterpillar on a leaf considers the general welfare of the cabbage patch. Please remember these facts, Mr. Phillips, in consideration of his case.

“Six months ago an envelope arrived at his house with two inclosures. One was the newspaper clipping you hold; the other a letter denouncing him as a hypocrite, and warning him that unless the sum of twenty pounds was placed in the locker of a little summer-house at the end of his garden, the writer would expose him to all Brendon in his true character as a convicted drunkard.

“Coran was in despair. He had imagined his unfortunate spree long forgotten. Not even his own relatives were aware of it. He was trying for a seat on the County Council; the election was due in a month, and he relied for his success on the support of the temperance party. As an election weapon the old scandal could be used with striking effect. So he paid—as many a better man has been fool enough to do under like circumstances.

“In three days—on Saturday, that is—the election takes place. This morning he received a letter similar to the first, save that

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the demand was for a hundred pounds. He had just sense enough to see that if he allowed himself to be blackmailed again it would merely encourage further attempt at extortion. So when he arrived in town, he took a cab to Scotland Yard. I heard his story, and caught the next train down to Brendon. I did not call at the house, but gathered a few details concerning him and his family. In all particulars he seems to have spoken the truth."

"Must the hundred pounds be placed in the summer-house to-night?"

"No. The blackmailer gave him a day to collect the money. It must be in the locker to-morrow night by eleven o'clock."

"Which means that you will watch the place and pull out the fish as he takes the bait. It seems simple enough, anyhow."

"Oh yes," he said. "But it is the faulty sense of proportion in Coran which provides the interest in the case. Even at the time the scandal was no very serious matter. What must be his frame of mind that it should terrorise him after all these years?"

When I left him half an hour later it was with the promise that I should have first news of the comedy's conclusion—for a

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tragedy it certainly was not, save for the blackmailer, if Peace should catch him.

The following afternoon I was sitting in my studio with the cigarette—that comes so pleasantly after tea and buttered toast—between my lips, when my servant, Jacob Hendry, thrust in his head to announce visitors. They came hard upon his heels—a long, grey-whiskered man in the lead, and the Inspector trotting behind. As they cleared the door, the little detective twisted round his companion and waived an introductory hand.

“This is Mr. James Coran,” he said.
“We want your assistance, Mr. Phillips.”

The long man stood staring at me and screwing his hands together in evident agitation. He had a hollow, melancholy face, a weak mouth, and eyes of an indecisive grey. From his square-toed shoes to the bald patch on the top of his head he was extremely, almost flagrantly, respectable.

“I am taking a great liberty, sir,” he said humbly, “but you are, as it were, a straw to one who is sinking beneath the waters of affliction. Do you, by chance, know the town of Brendon?”

“I have never been so fortunate as to visit it,” I told him.

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"I understand from the police-officer here that you have travelled abroad. Accustomed, therefore, to the corruption that taints the municipal life of other cities, you can scarcely comprehend the whole-souled enthusiasm with which we of Brendon approach the duties, may I say the sacred trust, of administering to the sanitary and moral welfare of our county. Those whom we select must be of unstained reputation. From a place on the sports committee of the flower show I myself have risen through successive grades until even the Houses of Parliament seemed within the limit of legitimate ambition. But now, sir, now it seems that, through a boyish indiscretion when a student at the Regent's Street Polytechnic, I may be denounced in my advancing years as a roysterer, a tippler, almost a convicted criminal. They would not hesitate. Mark my words, sir, if Horledge and Panton—my opponent's chief supporters in Saturday's election—are informed of these facts, they will mention them on platforms, they may even display them on hoardings."

He paused, sighed deeply, and wiped his face with a large silk pocket-handkerchief. The situation was ridiculous enough, yet not without a certain pathos underlying the

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humour ; for the man was sincerely in earnest.

“If I can help you, Mr. Coran, I am at your disposal,” I told him.

“It is a matter of considerable delicacy,” he said. “My younger daughter, Emily, has formed an attachment which is most disagreeable to me.”

“Indeed,” I murmured.

“The young man, Thomas Appleton by name, is of more than doubtful character. Miss Rebecca, my sister, has seen him boating on the Thames in the company of ladies whose appearance was—er—distinctly theatrical.”

“You surprise me.”

“He has been known to visit music-halls.”

“Did Miss Rebecca see him there, too?”

“Certainly not, sir ; but she has it from a sure source. It was obviously my duty to forbid him the house. I performed that duty, and extorted a promise from my daughter that she would cease to communicate with him. In my belief, it is he who has discovered the scandal to which I need not again refer, and, in revenge, is levying this blackmail. The law shall strike him, if there is justice left in England.”

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"And where do I come in?" I asked, for he had paused in a flurry of indignation.

"Perhaps I had better explain," Peace interposed. "Owing to this unfortunate love-affair, it is plain that no member of Mr. Coran's family must learn that this young man is suspected or that steps are being taken for his arrest. It would not be unreasonable to fear that he might be warned. I am staying with Mr. Coran to-night, but I do not want to go alone. I might take an assistant from the Yard, but it is hard to pick a man who has not 'Criminal Investigation Department' stamped upon him. You look innocent enough, Mr. Phillips. Will you come with us, and lend me a hand?"

I agreed at once. It could not fail to be an amusing adventure. After some discussion, it was arranged that Peace and I should be introduced as business friends of Mr. Coran, who had asked us down to Brendon on a sudden invitation. A telegram was sent off to that effect.

For the first fifteen minutes of the train we shared a crowded compartment. Gradually, however, our companions dropped away until we were left to ourselves. Mr. Coran was in evident hesitation of mind. He

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She laid it down with a thump, removed her glasses, and received us with great modesty and decorum. The inspector and a fox terrier, that set up a barking as we entered, were the only members of the party that seemed natural and at ease.

I found the dinner pass pleasantly enough, despite the gloom that radiated from the brother and sister.

Emily, the victim of the "unfortunate attachment," quite captured my fancy, though I am not a ladies' man. Twice we dared to laugh, though the reproving eyes of the elders were constantly upon us. In the intervals of my talk with her I obtained the keenest enjoyment from listening to the conversation of Peace and Miss Rebecca. The lady cross-examined him very much as if he were a prisoner accused of various grave and monstrous offences. Upon the question of anti-vivisection she was especially urgent.

"My brother refuses the movement his support," she said in a loud, firm voice. "My reply to him is torturer, inquisitor. What are your views on the subject?"

"The same, my dear madam, as your own," said the disgraceful little hypocrite. "How does the cause progress in Brendon?"

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"I trust that in a few weeks our local branch will have been placed on such a basis as to be a model to the whole society."

"Aunt is rather a crank on anti-vivisection," whispered Miss Emily in my ear. "Do be careful, if she tackles you about it."

I laughed, and the subject changed between us.

After the ladies left, Coran began a gloomy autobiography. His family, he said, had been living in the North of England at the time of his London escapade. No account of the affair, which appeared in only one paper, had reached them. He had left for Sheffield shortly afterwards, and it was not until ten years later that the death of his father had given him a couple of thousand pounds, with which he bought a share in his present business, which had greatly prospered.

Concerning Thomas Appleton, the young man whom he suspected, he spoke most bitterly. He was, indeed, in the middle of his denunciations when Peace slipped from his chair and moved softly to the window.

With a swift jerk he drew the blind aside and stared out. From where I sat I could see an empty stretch of lawn with shrubs beyond showing darkly in the summer twilight.

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"A lovely evening," he said over his shoulder.

We both watched him in surprise as he dropped the blind and walked back to his seat, stopping on his way to pat the terrier that lay on a mat by the window.

"Is there anything the matter?" asked Coran.

"If we are to keep our business here a secret you must not talk too loud—that is all."

"I don't understand you."

"One of your household was listening at the window."

"Do you mean to tell me that I am spied upon by my own people?" cried Coran, angrily. "What gave you such an idea?"

"The dog there."

"Absurd!"

"Not at all, Mr. Coran. From where he lay he could look under the lower edge of the blind, which was not drawn completely down. He raised his ears; some one approached; he wagged his tail, it was a friend with whom he was well acquainted. If it had been a stranger he would have run barking to the window. It is simple enough, surely."

"Did you see who it was?" asked our host, with a sudden change of manner.

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"No," said the little man. "But I think this conversation unwise. Shall we join the ladies in the drawing-room?"

Peace was in his most entertaining mood that night. Poor Emily, who was sitting by the French windows, staring sadly out into the gathering shadows, was led to the piano, where she recalled her forbidden lover in sentimental ditties. He engaged Miss Rebecca in an argument on the local control of licensed premises, which gave that worthy old lady an opportunity for genuine oratory. Even our melancholy host was drawn out of his miseries by a reference to the water supply.

When ten o'clock came, and the ladies were led away under Miss Rebecca's wing—they keep early hours in Brendon—I shook the inspector by the hand in sincere admiration. It had been a really smart performance, and I told him so.

The little man did not respond. Instead, he drew us together in a corner and issued his orders with sharp precision.

"Mr. Coran, at fifteen minutes to eleven you will leave the house by the drawing-room windows and place the envelope you have prepared in the locker of the summer-house. When you return do not fasten the catch, for

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I may wish to enter during the night. Walk upstairs to your bed and get to sleep if you can. Mr. Phillips, you will go to your room and stay there. The window overlooks the garden. If you want to keep watch—for I do not suppose you can resist that temptation—see that your head is well out of sight. When Mr. Coran leaves the house, listen at your door. If you hear any one moving, go and find out who it may be. You understand?”

“Yes,” I answered. “But what are you going to do?”

“Discover a suitable place from which I can keep an eye on the summer-house. Good night to you.”

When I reached my room, I took off my coat, placed a chair some six feet back from the open window, so that the rising moon should not show my face to any watchers in the laurels, and so waited events.

It was a soft summer night, such as only temperate England knows. There was not a breath of wind; a perfume of flowers crept in from the garden; every leaf stood black and still in the silvery light. I heard the clock chime three-quarters of an hour in some room beneath me. The last stroke had barely shivered into silence when I saw Coran appear

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upon the lawn, walking towards the summer-house, the outlines of which I could distinguish amongst the heavier shadows of the trees by which it was surrounded. I remembered my orders, and crept softly to the door which I had left ajar. The minutes slip by without a sound, and presently I began to wonder why Coran had not returned. His room was not far from mine. I must have heard his foot upon the stairs. He had disobeyed his orders, that was evident. However, it was not my affair, and I crept back to my point of observation.

Twelve! I heard the clock tap out the news from the room below. I was nodding in my chair, barely awake. After all, it was a trivial matter, this trumpery blackmail. Half an hour more, thought I, pulling out my watch, and I will get to bed.

The affair was becoming extremely monotonous. I dared not light a cigarette, for I felt certain that Peace would notice the glow from outside, and that I should hear of it in the morning. Ten minutes, a quarter of an hour—what was that moving under the trees by the edge of the drive? It was a man—two men. I crouched forward with every nerve in me suddenly awakened.

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They were a good thirty yards apart, the one following the other with stealthy strides—not the sort of walk with which honest men go about honest business.

When the leader came to the path which led towards the summer-house, he turned down it, leaving the drive to his right. He avoided the gravel, keeping to the silent turf which fringed it. His companion followed him step by step.

It was a curious spectacle, these slow-moving shadows that drifted forward through the night, now almost obscured beneath the branches, now showing in black silhouette against a patch of moonlight.

As the first man melted amongst the trees about the summer-house, the other moved forward swiftly for a score of steps and then halted for a moment, crouching behind a clump of laurel. Suddenly he sprang up again and ran straight forward, cutting a corner across the lower edge of the lawn.

There was no shouting, but I could hear the faint tramping of a scuffle and the thud of falling bodies. Then all was still again.

Peace had told me to remain in the house. But Peace had never expected two men; I was sure of that. I crept down the stairs,

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out through the French windows of the drawing-room, and so across the lawn to the trees about the summer-house.

As I passed through them I saw a little group standing in whispered conversation. They turned sharply upon me. One was a stranger, but his companions were Peace and, to my vast surprise, old Coran himself.

"Well, Mr. Phillips," said the detective, "and what do you want?"

"I thought"—I began.

"Oh, you've been thinking, too, have you," he snapped. "Here is a young man who was thinking he would like to look at this extremely commonplace summer-house; here is Mr. Coran who was thinking he might help me by lurking about his garden instead of going to bed; and here are you with Heaven knows what ideas in your head. Perhaps you and Mr. Coran will do what you are told another time."

"I saw two men," I explained humbly. "I was afraid they might get the better of you. How was I to know that it was Mr. Coran who had disobeyed orders?"

"You are both pleased to be humorous," said our host, and I could see he was trembling with rage. "But the fact remains that I

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caught this young man entering the summer-house for a purpose we can well imagine. Inspector Addington Peace, I charge this person, Thomas Appleton, with blackmail."

"Can you explain your presence, Mr. Appleton?" asked the detective, kindly.

He did not look a criminal, for he stood very straight and square, regarding the three of us with an amused smile.

"Of course, I had no right to be here," he said. "Though why I should find a detective waiting to arrest me for blackmail, or why Mr. Coran should spring upon my back and roll me over, I cannot imagine."

"This is much as I expected," snarled his accuser. "Effrontery and impudence are ever the associates of crime. Inspector, you will oblige me by producing the handcuffs."

"I should like a word in private, Mr. Coran."

They walked off together, leaving me alone with Mr. Thomas Appleton, who offered a cigarette.

"Has there been an epidemic of lunacy in the neighbourhood?" he inquired politely.

"No," I said, laughing in spite of myself. "But how, in Heaven's name, do you explain

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your visit to the summer-house at this hour of the night ? ”

“ I am afraid I must decline to answer you,” he said, and quietly turned the subject.

Coran returned, with a face of vindictive indecision. Under his veil of austerity there had smouldered a dangerous temper, which was close upon bursting into flame. But, after all, he had excuse enough. Heaven alone knew what balked ambition, what treacherous insults, he had come to associate with this young man. The same passions actuate humanity whether they view the world from one end of the telescope or the other.

“ I have decided to waive your arrest for the present,” he growled.

“ It would certainly create a great scandal in Brendon,” said Appleton, firmly.

“ You count on that, do you ? ” cried the elder man. “ You think you have a hold upon me, that I am afraid of you. Take care, sir, take care.”

“ You choose to be mysterious, Mr. Coran. I have no hold upon you. But I should think twice if I were you before arresting an innocent man.”

“ Innocent ! What were you doing here ? ”

“ That is my business.”

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Coran turned away, wringing his hands together in his odd manner when greatly excited.

"Go," he snarled over his shoulder. "Go, before I strangle you."

As I dropped off to sleep half an hour later I was still wondering why Peace had refused a bed, remaining for the night in the garden. Could he expect more visits to the summer-house? Why had young Appleton come sneaking up at so late an hour if he were not guilty? The problem that had seemed so simple was changed into a maze of strange complications. I was too sleepy to trace them further.

I was awakened by a touch on my shoulder. It was Coran who stood by my bedside.

"We breakfast in half an hour," he said uneasily.

"I will be punctual."

"Forgive my importunity, Mr. Phillips; but promise me that you will be careful before Miss Rebecca. She is so very acute. I never knew a woman with a keener instinct for scandal. And, as a father, I cannot forget the future of my poor girls. If she knew the truth she would not leave them a penny; also, her heart is affected."

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"I am sorry to hear it."

"Thank you. It is very necessary that you should be discreet."

He stalked out of the room and left me wondering at him with an amused cynicism.

I started for London with my host by the 9.5. To avoid suspicion, Peace accompanied us to the station ; but there he left us. He had, he said, work to do in the town.

Coran was cheerful with the limited cheerfulness that Nature allowed him. Doubtless he felt that he had his enemy in his power. He was very talkative concerning the final address which he was advertised to deliver that evening at eight o'clock. It was to be the completion, the coping-stone to his campaign, and was calculated to ensure his election next day. I expressed regret that I should not be privileged to hear it.

I lunched at my club, and, shortly after three, returned to my rooms. There, in my easiest chair, reading an evening paper, who should I discover but Inspector Peace.

"Hello," I said. "I didn't expect you back so soon."

"This is a very comfortable chair of yours, Mr. Phillips," he smiled. "I was glad of a rest."

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“And how goes Brendon?”

“So well that I am going to take you down there by the 4.10 train.”

I tried to draw his discoveries out of him, but he would tell me nothing. Something was going to happen which might interest me if I came along—that was the beginning and end of his news. It was sufficient to make me promise to join him, however, as he very well knew.

The local was just steaming into the station when a fat, red-faced man came panting out of the booking-office. Peace gave my arm a squeeze as he passed.

“That is Horledge, the chief supporter of Coran’s opponent in to-morrow’s election,” he whispered.

“So you have been making some new friends since I saw you last?”

“One or two,” he said, stepping into a carriage.

When we arrived at Brendon, the inspector led me off to an inn in the centre of the town. It was a pleasant, old-fashioned place, with black rafters peering through the plaster of the ceiling and oak panelling high on the walls. The modern Brendon had wrapped it about, but it had not changed for three

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centuries. You may find many such ancient inns about London, which watch the march of the red-brick suburbs with a dignified surprise, until one day the builder steps in, and the old Coach and Horses or White Hart comes tumbling down, and a cheap chop and tea house reigns in its stead. We dined early. At half-past seven, by the grandfather's clock in the corner, Peace rose.

"Mr. Coran's meeting does not begin until eight; but I want to be there early—come along."

The platform was empty when we arrived, but a score of people were already on the front benches. We did not join them, seating ourselves near the door. Brendon, or the graver part of it, moved by us in a tiny stream. A few elders walked up to the platform with the air of those who realize that they are something in the world. The clock above them was pointing to the hour when, with a thumping of feet and a clapping of hands, Coran appeared, and shook hands with the white-whiskered old chairman.

It was while the chairman was introducing "the popular and venerated townsman who had come to address them," that the red face of Mr. Horledge came peering in at the door.

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He stood there for a minute, and then modestly sat down on the bench before us. Peace touched my arm, and we moved along until we were just behind him.

The chairman ended at last, and, amid fresh applause, Coran rose and stood gazing down at the little crowd with a benevolent satisfaction. Their respect and admiration was the breath of life to the man. You could see it in his eyes, in his gesture as he begged for silence.

“My friends.”

He had got no farther when Horledge sprang to his feet with a raised hand.

“Mr. Chairman,” he shouted. “I have a question to ask the candidate.”

There was a slight outcry, a few hisses and groans; but the tide of local politics did not run strongly in Brendon. Besides, everyone knew Horledge. He had the largest grocer’s shop in the town.

“It would be better to question him after his speech, Mr. Horledge,” protested the old chairman.

“I should prefer to answer this gentleman at once,” Coran interposed.

He stood with his hands, clasping and unclasping, before him, but never moved his

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eyes from his opponent. There was grit in the fellow, after all.

"It would be simpler if you withdrew," said the red-faced man, shuffling his feet uneasily.

"That your party's candidate might be returned unopposed?"

"Don't force me to explain," cried Horledge. "Why not withdraw?"

"You waste the time of the meeting."

"Very well, gentlemen, I say that Mr. Coran there is no fit candidate, because——"

There is something unsettling in the official tap on the shoulder which the police of all countries cultivate, something which it does not take previous experience to recognize. Horledge's face turned a shade paler as he glanced over his shoulder at the little man who has thus demanded his attention.

"And what do you want?" he growled.

"I am Inspector Addington Peace, of the Criminal Investigation Department. I warn you, Mr. Horledge, that you are lending yourself to an attempt at blackmail."

The detective spoke in so soft a voice that I, who was standing by his side, could barely catch the words.

"Bless my soul, you don't say so?" cried the other.

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"I should like a five minutes' talk with Mr. Coran and yourself. After that you may take your own course. Will you suggest it?"

Mr. Horledge did not take long to make up his mind. He told the meeting that he might have been misinformed. If they would permit it, he asked for a five minutes' private conversation with the candidate.

The meeting received the suggestion with cheers. It was something unusual in the monotony of such functions. We walked up the central aisle between a couple of hundred pairs of curious eyes, mounted the platform, and followed Coran into a small ante-room, the door of which Peace closed behind him.

"On June 15 the Brendon Anti-Vivisection Society, of which you, Mr. Horledge, are president, received the sum of twenty pounds from an anonymous source," said the little detective.

"Certainly."

"That sum was extorted from Mr. Coran by the threat of revealing the secret which Miss Rebecca Coran told you this morning, and which you verified this afternoon by a reference to the old newspaper files in the British Museum."

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"I had no idea—this is most surprising. I—is it illegal?" he stuttered.

"Blackmail for whatever purpose is illegal. Further attempts have been made to extort money. It is because they failed that you were placed in possession of the facts to-day."

"It seemed a mean trick, any way," said Horledge, penitently. "I wish I had never listened to the old cat. But, Squaretoes—I beg your pardon, Mr. Coran—I mean our friend here has always been such a model that I thought it rather fun. On my word, his secret is safe with me. He can win the election, and welcome, after this."

"That is all, then. I want a word in private with these two gentlemen. Good night to you, and many thanks."

"Great Scot! Inspector, but you gave me a fright. I hope, Mr. Coran, you don't bear malice? That's all right, then. Good night all."

As he disappeared through the door the elder man dropped into a chair, covering his face with his hands.

"This is shocking!" he groaned. "Oh, Mr. Peace, are you sure it was my sister?"

"There is no doubt at all."

"But what am I to do now?" he asked,

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looking from one to the other of us, with a pitiable expression. "Shall I withdraw?"

"Nonsense," said the little detective, firmly. "Fight your election and win it, sir; and the best way to begin is to go back and tell them all about it."

"Go and tell them? Go and tell the meeting?" he cried.

"Yes. They'll like you all the better for it. Do you suppose there is no human nature in Brendon? Are you going to keep this miserable scandal hanging over your head all your life? If you stick to politics some one is sure to rake it up. Be a man, Mr. Coran, and get it over now."

"I will."

He had got to his feet, his eyes set with a sudden determination. He stretched out his hand to each of us, turned about, and marched out of the room like a soldier leading a forlorn hope against a fortress. As the door slammed behind him, Peace looked at me with an expression in which sympathy and humour were oddly mingled.

"Take my word for it, Mr. Phillips," he said, "many a reputation for desperate valour has been won by a less sacrifice."

* * * * *

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It was not until after two days that I heard the arguments by which the inspector had worked his way to a conclusion. They form a good example of his methods.

"It was evident," he said, "that the blackmailer knew Coran's character, his position as regards the election, and the details of his house and grounds. Those facts suggested a relative or close personal friend. The theory that it was a relative was strengthened by the newspaper cutting. It was not a thing a casual acquaintance would be likely to keep by him all these years.

"From Coran I learnt that he had had differences of opinion with Miss Rebecca. In my conversation with her she spoke bitterly of his refusal to subscribe to her society for the prevention of vivisection. She returned to the subject several times, mentioning the financial difficulties in which the local branch, of which she is the secretary, was placed. Those facts impressed me.

"Before Appleton arrived last night I had carefully searched the summer-house. In a corner of the woodwork I discovered a note from Miss Emily. The place was the lover's letter-box. Indeed, I had been expecting that

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young gentleman's appearance long before he came. I did not, however, tell this to Mr. Coran when he pressed for an arrest. It would hardly have been fair on the girl. I do not imagine that they will find the old gentleman so stony-hearted after to-night. As for the young man, in the inquiries I made concerning him, I found nothing that was not straight and honest. I put him out of the list at an early date.

"Who the person may have been that listened at the window I cannot say; but I conclude it was Miss Rebecca. She certainly did not attempt to carry off the parcel.

"This morning I discovered that an anonymous donation of twenty pounds was sent to Miss Rebecca's society the day after the first successful attempt at blackmail. I kept an eye on the house, and shortly after midday she walked down to Horledge's shop. He is the president of her society. They remained for some time together, and then Horledge took a train to London. I followed him to the newspaper room in the British Museum. Things were becoming plainer.

"I have now no doubt that Miss Rebecca guessed who we were from the first. She told the secret to Horledge, who was, you

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remember, one of her brother's chief opponents in the election, out of sheer feminine spite. I suspected the man would attempt something at the meeting on Friday night. My suspicion was correct, as you saw."

"And the election?"

"He won his seat on the Council. I think he deserved it, Mr. Phillips."

VIII

THE MYSTERY OF THE JADE
SPEAR

VIII

THE MYSTERY OF THE JADE SPEAR

"ARE you Inspector Peace, sir?"

He looked what he was, a gardener's boy, and he stood on the platform of Richmond Station regarding us with a solemn, if cherubic, countenance. The little inspector nodded his head as he felt in his pocket for the tickets.

"I have a cab waiting for you, sir."

"Are you from the Elms?"

"Yes, sir. Miss Sherrick sent me to meet you, having heard as you were coming."

We walked up the steps to the roadway, climbed into the cab, and, with the boy on the box, dragged our way up the steep of the narrow street, past the Star and Garter (the hostelry of ancient glories), and so for a mile until, at a word from our youthful conductor, the cab drew up at a wicket-gate in a fence of split oak.

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As we stepped out a girl swung open the gate and stood confronting us.

She was a tall and graceful creature, with the delicacy of the blonde colouring a beautiful face. There was fear in her blue eyes, a fear that widened and fixed them; and a tremor of the full red lips that told of a great calamity.

"Inspector Addington Peace?"

"Yes, Miss Sherrick."

There was that about the little inspector which ever invited the trust of the innocent, and also, to be frank, no inconsiderable proportion of the guilty, to their special disadvantage. I have noticed a similar confidence inspired by certain of the more famous doctors. So I was not surprised when Miss Sherrick walked up to him, and laid her hand on his arm, with a confident appeal in her eyes.

"Do you know they have arrested him?" she said.

"I had not heard. What is his name?"

"Mr. Boyne."

"The man who found the body."

"Yes. The man I intend to marry."

I liked that sentence. It was stronger than any protestations of his innocence that she could have made. Peace marked it, too,

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for he smiled, watching her with his head to one side in his solemn fashion.

"You cannot think he is guilty," she said quietly. "You are too clever for that, Inspector Peace."

"My dear young lady, at two o'clock I heard that a Colonel Bulstrode, of The Elms, Richmond, had been stabbed to death in a road near his house. That was the single fact telegraphed to Scotland Yard. Taking my friend here, I caught the 2.35 from Waterloo Station. It is now half-past three. As you will observe, my work has not yet commenced."

"I sent the boy to meet you. I wished you to hear my story before you saw—the police up at the house. I should like to tell you all I know."

"That will, doubtless, be very valuable," said the little inspector. "Can you find us a place where we shall not be disturbed?"

For answer she led the way through the wicket-gate. A couple of turns and the winding walk brought us to an open space in the laurels and rhododendrons. On the further side was a garden-bench, and there we seated ourselves, waiting, with great anxiety on my part at least, for further details of the tragedy.

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"My father was a widower," said Miss Sherrick, "and when he died he left as my guardians and trustees my mother's two brothers, Colonel Bulstrode and Mr. Anstruther Bulstrode. Colonel Bulstrode, who had been in the Indian Staff Corps, had retired the year before my father's death, and taken this house. It was with him that I went to live. Richmond suited him, for he could spend the day at his London club and yet be home in plenty of time for dinner.

"My uncle Anstruther was also an Anglo-Indian. He had been for many years a planter in Ceylon. It was on the Colonel's advice that he took a house near us when he came home this spring.

"I first met Mr. Boyne last Christmas, when we were skating on some flooded meadows by the Thames. He is a lawyer, and, though he is doing well, is by no means a rich man. Unfortunately, I am an heiress, Inspector Peace."

"I understand, Miss Sherrick."

"Colonel Bulstrode expected me to make what he called a first-rate marriage. Mr. Boyne and I had been engaged for two weeks, and at last we decided to tell the Colonel. We knew there would be trouble, but there

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was nothing to be gained by continued postponement. Mr. Boyne made an appointment with him for one o'clock to-day.

"The morning seemed as if it were never to end. As the hour approached I could wait in my room no longer. I slipped out of a side door into the upper garden, which lies at the further side of the house. I wandered about for some time in great misery. When I heard the stable clock chime the half-hour, I started back to the house. It must have been decided between them one way or the other."

"I had reached the drive and was walking up to the front door when I saw Cullen, the butler, come running out of the Wilderness—as we call the shrubberies where we now are—and so across the lawn towards me. He was in an excited state, waving his arms and shouting. Cullen is so stout and respectable that I could only conclude that he had gone mad. When he was some twenty yards off, he caught sight of me, and slunk away towards the front door as if trying to avoid me.

"'What is the matter, Cullen?' I called to him.

"He slackened his pace, and finally stopped, with his eyes staring at me in an odd fashion.

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“ ‘You come in with me, miss,’ he stammered. ‘It’s no mischief of your making. Eh, eh, but it’s ugly work—black and ugly work.’

“ ‘What do you mean, Cullen?’ I said as boldly as I could, for his manner frightened me.

“ ‘The colonel has come by an accident, miss, down by the wicket-gate. I was going for a doctor.’

“I did not wait to hear more. I was very fond of my guardian, Mr. Peace. He had a hot temper, but to me he had ever been kind and considerate. As I started, however, Cullen came panting up and tried to turn me back, waving his hands. Lunatic or not, I did not mean to let him frighten me. So I avoided him, and set off running across the grass to the Wilderness gate—the one through which we have just come. I had almost reached it when I met Mr. Boyne. I was surprised, for I thought he had already gone home. Beyond him I could see the gate, with two of our gardeners standing on the further side and talking earnestly together.

“I asked Mr. Boyne what was the matter, and for answer he took me by the arm and led me back towards the house. He looked

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very white and ill. I still begged for an explanation, and at last he told me the truth. My uncle, Colonel Bulstrode, had been found lying in the road stabbed to death with a spear. They had no idea who the murderer might be.

"They brought up the body to the house. Afterwards they let me see him. Even in death his face was convulsed with passion. Oh, it is dreadful, dreadful!"

Her reserve gave way all in a moment, and she burst into a fit of sobbing, hiding her face in her hands. It was some time before she regained her self-control, and when she spoke again it was with difficulty and in detached sentences.

"It was about three o'clock," she said. "Mr. Boyne came into the room where I was. He told me that my uncle had spoken very bitterly to him in their interview, and that there had been a quarrel between them; but Mr. Boyne's sorrow was sincere. I am sure it was sincere. Afterwards he begged me not to believe any rumours I might hear about him. Then he went away. Afterwards, as I was looking from the window, I saw him walking down the drive with a policeman. Several of the servants were gathered at the

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front door watching and pointing. I don't know how—but the suspicion came to me—perhaps it was through what Cullen had said. I ran down the stairs and ordered them to answer. At last they told me—he had been arrested—for the murder.”

We waited for a while, and then the little inspector rose, and, in his courteous manner, offered her his arm. She took it, looking at him through her tears.

“He is innocent, Mr. Peace,” she said.

“I trust so, Miss Sherrick.”

They moved off up the walk, I following behind them. We emerged from the shrubbery on to a broad lawn. The house, a sprawling old mansion of red brick, was before us. We crossed the grass, and, turning an angle of the house, came to the porch, from which a drive curled away amongst the foliage of an avenue of elms.

The central hall was better fitted for a museum than a habitation of comfort-loving folk. Bronze gods and goddesses glimmered in the corners, dragons carved in teak glared upon the Eastern arms and armour that lined the walls, the duller hues of ivory and jade contrasted with the brilliant turquoise of old Pekin vases. It was here, among these spoils

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of the East, that Miss Sherrick left us, walking up the stairs to her room, as fair a figure of beauty in distress as a man might see.

As she disappeared, a tall, thin fellow in plain clothes stepped out of a door on our right and saluted the inspector.

"Good afternoon, Sergeant Hales," said Addington Peace. "So you have arrested Boyne?"

"Yes, sir."

"Upon good grounds?"

"The evidence is almost complete against him."

"Indeed. I shall be pleased to hear it."

"Well, sir, it stands like this. Mr. Boyne called upon Colonel Bulstrode about one o'clock. He was shown into the library and——"

"One moment," interrupted the inspector. "Where is the library?"

"That is the door, sir," answered Hales, pointing to the room from which he had emerged.

"Perhaps it would be easier to understand if we go there?"

The library was a long, low room, lined with shelves that were in a great part empty. It projected from the main building—evidently

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it was of more recent construction—and thus could be lighted by windows on both sides. To our right were two which commanded the drive; to the left two more looked out upon a plot of grass dotted with flower-beds, upon which several windows at the side of the house, at right angles to the library, also faced.

“Pray continue,” said Inspector Peace.

“About ten minutes later, Cullen, the butler, heard high words passing. A regular fighting quarrel it sounded—or so he says.”

“How could he hear? Was he listening in the hall?”

“No, sir; he was in his pantry, cleaning silver. The pantry is the first of those windows at the side of the house. The library windows being open, he could hear the sound of loud voices, though, as he says, he could not distinguish the words.”

The inspector walked to an open lattice and thrust out his head. He closed it before he came back to us, as he did to the second window on the same side.

“Mr. Cullen must not be encouraged,” he said gently. “He is there now, listening with pardonable curiosity. Well, Sergeant?”

“Presently there came a tremendous peal

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at his bell, and he hurried to answer it. When he reached the hall, he found the colonel and Mr. Boyne standing together. 'You understand me, Boyne,' the colonel was saying, 'If I catch you lurking about here again after my niece's money-bags, I'll thrash you within an inch of your life; I will, by thunder!' The young man gave the colonel an ugly look, but he had seen the butler, who was standing behind his master, and kept silent. 'Show this fellow out, Cullen,' said the colonel. 'And if he ever calls slam the door in his face.' And with that he stumped back into the library, swearing to himself in a manner that, as the butler declares, gave him the creeps, it was so very imaginative.

"With one thing and another, Cullen was so dumfounded—for he thought that Boyne and Miss Sherrick were as good as engaged already—that he stood in the shadow of the porch watching the young gentleman. Boyne walked down the drive for a hundred yards or so, looked back at the house, and, not seeing the butler, as he supposes, turned off to the left along a path that led towards the fruit gardens. Cullen did not know what to make of it. However, it was none of his business, and at last he went back to his pantry.

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Sticking out his head, he could see the colonel writing at that desk"—the sergeant pointed a finger at a knee-hole table littered with papers that was set in the further of the windows looking out upon the grass-plot—"and so concluded that he could not have seen Boyne leave the drive, having had his back to it at the time.

"About twenty minutes later Cullen and Mary Thomas, the parlour-maid, were in the dining-room, getting the table ready for lunch. This room looks out upon the lawn at the front of the house. All of a sudden they heard a shout, and the next moment the colonel rushed by and made across the lawn to the Wilderness gate. He had a revolver in his hand, and was loading it as he ran. He dropped two cartridges in his hurry, for I found them myself when I was going over the ground. Cullen had been with him for years; he is an old soldier himself, and at the sight of the revolver he dropped the tray he was holding, climbed out of the window, and set off after his master, who had by then disappeared amongst the shrubberies.

"He is a slow traveller, is the old man, and he reckons that he was not more than halfway across the lawn when he heard a

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distant scream, which pulled him up in his tracks. It put the fear into him, that scream. He told me that he had seen too much active service not to know the cry that comes from a sudden and mortal wound. It was no surprise to him, therefore, when at last he reached the wicket-gate, to find his master lying dead in the road.

"Above him, tugging at the spear that had killed him, stood Boyne.

"There was no one in sight, and though the road curves at that point he could see it for fifty yards and more either way. He had no doubt in his own mind as to who had done the thing. Boyne must have seen the suspicion in his face, for he jumped back, Cullen says, and stood staring at him as white as a table-cloth.

" 'Why do you look at me like that, Cullen?' he says. 'You don't think——'

" 'If you can explain that away,' says Cullen, pointing to the body, 'you will be, sir, if you'll forgive me for saying it, a devilish clever man.'

" 'You're mad,' says Boyne. 'I found him like this.'

" 'And where did you spring from, if I may make so bold?' asked the butler. Very sarcastic he was, he tells me.

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“ ‘I had been in the upper garden, and as you very well know, Cullen, I wished to avoid the colonel,’ says the young man. ‘I came round the back of the house and entered the Wilderness at the upper end. I was walking down the centre path towards the wicket-gate, when I heard some one scream, and set off running. I could not have been here more than half a minute before you.’

“ The butler did not argue the matter, but left him standing beside the body, and went to get assistance. On the lawn he met two of the gardeners, and sent them back. I believe he also saw Miss Sherrick near the porch. It was upon those facts, sir, that I arrested Boyne.”

“ I don’t think said the inspector, shaking his head at him, “ I don’t think that I should have arrested him, Sergeant Hales.”

“ It looks very black against him, you must allow.”

“ Which affects his guilt or innocence neither one way nor the other. Has a doctor examined the body ? ”

“ Yes, sir, and extracted the spear.”

“ Why did you let him do that ? ” asked the little man, sharply.

“ I knew you would be vexed about it,

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but it was done while I was out of the house, examining the road and lawn. He was very careful not to handle it more than was necessary, he said ; but he had to saw the shaft in two."

"And why was that?"

"He said that the force used by the thrower must have been very great."

"Very great?"

"Yes, sir, gigantic—that is what he said."

Addington Peace walked to the window and stood there staring out at the elm avenue that swayed softly in the breeze.

"Is the doctor still in the house?" he asked over his shoulder.

"No, sir."

"We have none too much light left. Have you the spear?"

The sergeant opened a side cupboard and drew out two pieces of light-coloured wood. The polished surface was dulled by stains that were self-explanatory. The head was broad and flat, formed of the finest jade, microscopically carved. It had been fashioned for Eastern ceremony, and not for battle. That was plain enough.

Peace returned to the window and examined it with the closest attention. Presently

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he slipped out a magnifying glass, staring eagerly at a spot on the longer portion of the shaft.

“Do I understand you, Sergeant Hales, that you found Boyne endeavouring to pull out the spear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Who else touched it?”

“No one that I know of, save the doctor.”

“And yourself?”

“Of course, sir.”

“Let me see your hands.”

The sergeant thrust them out with a smile. They had plainly not been washed that afternoon.

“Thank you. Have you discovered the owner of this spear?”

“No, sir; I wish I could.”

“Have you tried Cullen or Miss Sherrick?”

“No, sir,” said the sergeant, looking blankly at the inspector.

The little man walked to the fireplace and touched the electric bell. In a few moments the door opened and a fat, red-faced man walked in. There is no mistaking the attitude and costume of a British butler.

“Colonel Bulstrode was a collector of

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jade?" said the inspector, in his most innocent manner.

"Yes, sir."

"I noticed the specimens in the hall. Well, Cullen, have you ever seen this spear amongst his trophies?"

The man glanced at it, and then shrank back with a shiver.

"It's the thing that killed him," he stammered.

"Exactly. But you do not answer my question."

"There may have been one like it, but I couldn't swear to it, sir. The colonel would never have his collection touched. He or Miss Sherrick dusted 'em and arranged 'em themselves. He was always buying some new thing."

"Would Miss Sherrick know?"

"Very likely, sir."

"Thank you. That is all."

As the butler closed the door, the sergeant stepped up to the inspector and saluted.

"I should have noticed those collections," he said. "I have made a fool of myself, sir."

"A man who can make such an admission is never a fool, Sergeant Hales. And now

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kindly take me upstairs to the colonel's room. You can wait here, Mr. Phillips."

It was close upon the half-hour before they came back to me, and I had leisure enough for considering the problem. When Peace had walked into my rooms at lunch-time, mentioning that he had a case with possibilities at Richmond, if I cared to come with him, I had never expected so strange a development. Nor, I fancy, had he.

This Colonel Bulstrode had served many years in India. Had the mysteries of the East followed him home to a London suburb? The gigantic force with which this spear had been thrown—there was something abnormal there, a something difficult to explain. Yet, after all, it might be a simple matter. Boyne was presumably a strong man, and the deadly fury that induces murder in a law-abiding citizen is akin to madness, giving almost a madman's strength. I was still puzzling over it when the door opened and the little inspector walked in.

"The story of Sergeant Hales?" I asked him. "Is he exaggerating—was the spear thrown with unusual violence?"

"Very unusual. It is the crime of a giant or——"

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He did not finish his sentence, but stood tapping the table and staring out at the gold and green of a summer sunset. At last he turned to me with a slow inclination of the head.

"Hales is waiting," he said, "and we must get to work. The light will not last for ever."

The sergeant led us over the lawn to the Wilderness and through its paths to the wicket-gate. Showers in the early morning had turned the dust of the road into a grey mud that had dried under the afternoon sunshine. The surface was scored into a puzzle of diverging lines by the wheels of carts and carriages, cycles and motors. Yet Peace hunted it over even more closely than he had hunted the paths in the grounds. He was particularly anxious to know the position in which the body had lain, and finally the sergeant got down in the drying mud to show him.

Apparently the colonel had walked about ten yards from the gate when the spear struck him. He had fallen almost in the centre of the road, which at that point was broad, with stretches of grass bordering it on either side. His revolver had not been

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fired, though he had been found with it in his hand.

We walked on down the road, Addington Peace leading, his eyes fixed on its surface, and the sergeant and I following behind. For myself, I had not the remotest idea of what he hoped to effect by this promenade, nor do I believe had the sergeant. We circled the outside of the gardens, the road finally curving to the left, and bringing us to the entrance-gates. Here we stopped at a word from the inspector. The little man himself walked on, and finally dropped on his knees close to the hedge. When he joined us again, it was with an expression of satisfaction. He beamed through the gates at the old elm avenue, that rustled sleepily in the gathering dusk.

"What a pretty place it is," he said. "Thank Heaven that these old houses still find owners or tenants who dare to defy the jerry builder and all his works. Hello, and who may this be?"

He had turned to the toot of the horn. The motor was close upon us, for a steam-car moves in silence as compared to the busy hum of a petrol-driven machine. It stopped, and the chauffeur jumped down and ran to

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open the gates. Of the driver we could see nothing save a peaked cap, goggles, and a long white dust-coat.

As it disappeared up the avenue towards the house I heard a faint bubble of laughter in my ear. I turned in surprise.

"Why, Peace," I said, "what is the joke?"

"There is no joke, Mr. Phillips," he answered. "It was fate that laughed, not I."

There were moments when, to a man of ordinary curiosity, Inspector Addington Peace was extremely irritating.

We walked up the avenue in silence. The motor was standing at the front door, the chauffeur, a bright-faced youngster, loitering beside it. Peace greeted him politely, entering at once into a dissertation upon greasy roads and the dangers of side-slips. Was there nothing that would prevent them? He had heard that there was a patent, consisting of small chains crossing the tyres, that was excellent.

"It's about the best of them, sir," said the lad. "Mr. Bulstrode uses it on this car sometimes."

"So this is Mr. Anstruther Bulstrode's car?"

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"Yes, sir. He was the brother of the poor gentleman inside."

"The roads are fairly dry now," continued Peace, "but if you had been out this morning——"

"Oh, Mr. Bulstrode had the chains on this morning," he interrupted. "I did not go with him, but when he came back he told me he was glad to have them, for the roads were very bad."

"And Mr. Bulstrode thought the roads were dry enough this afternoon to do without them?"

"Yes. He told me to take them off. He——"

"I am glad to see the police interest themselves in motoring," broke in a high-pitched voice behind us. "I was under the impression—false as I now observe—that they were confirmed enemies to the sport."

A yellow husk of a man was Mr. Anstruther Bulstrode, as I knew this stranger must be. Years under the Indian sun had sucked the English blood from his veins and burnt their own dull colour into his cheeks. He stood on the step of the porch with his hands behind him and his little eyes glaring at the inspector like a pair of black beads. His

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mouth, twitching viciously under his straggly moustache, proved that the poor Colonel had not been the only member of the Bulstrode family possessed of an evil temper. Over his shoulder I could see Miss Sherrick's white face watching us. And now she stepped forward to explain.

"This is Inspector Peace, uncle," she said nervously.

"I know, my dear, I know. Do you think I can't tell a detective when I see him. So you have caught your man, eh, Inspector?"

"If you will come into the library, Mr. Bulstrode, I will answer what questions I may."

It was now close upon eight o'clock and the pleasant twilight of the long summer evening was drawing into heavier shadows. There was no gas in the old house, but Miss Sherrick ordered lamps to be brought in. We all seated ourselves about the big fireplace save Peace, who stood on the hearth-rug with his back to the flowers that filled the empty grate. The shaded lamp dealt duskily with our faces. There was a strain, a vague anxiety in the air that kept me leaning forward in my chair, nervous and watchful.

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"Well, Inspector," repeated Mr. Bulstrode, "what is your news?"

For answer, Peace walked up to the lamp and laid beneath it the jade spearhead, now cleaned and polished, with its four inches of broken shaft.

"Do you recognize that, Miss Sherrick?"

The girl bent over it without alarm. She had no idea what part it had played in that grim tragedy.

"Certainly," she said. "It is a unique piece of stone, and Colonel Bulstrode prized it more than anything else in his collection. I know it was hanging in the hall this morning, for I was at work with a duster. How did the shaft come to be broken?"

"An accident, Miss Sherrick."

"My poor uncle would have been dreadfully angry about it, and so must you be, Uncle Anstruther, for I understand you claim it to be yours."

"We did not come here, Mary, to talk about jade collecting," snarled the old planter.

"But does the spear really belong to you, Mr. Bulstrode?" asked the inspector, blandly.

The man stiffened himself in his chair

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with his fists clenched on his knees, and his beady eyes staring straight before him.

"That spear is mine, Mr. Detective. My brother having practically stolen it from me, threatened me with personal violence if I attempted to reclaim it. It was the most perfect piece of workmanship in my own collection. I shall take legal steps to claim my rightful property in due course."

"Your brother seems to have acted in a very high-handed manner with you, Mr. Bulstrode. I wonder that you did not walk in here one day and recover your property."

The planter rose with a twisted laugh.

"I'm not a housebreaker," he said. "Also, I must point out that I don't intend to sit here all night. Can I do anything more for you, Inspector?"

"No, Mr. Bulstrode."

"Or for you, Mary?"

"No, uncle. I have my maid, and there is Agatha, the housekeeper."

"So that's all right. Let us thank Heaven the criminal is no longer at large. It didn't take long for our excellent police to make up their minds. Gad! they're clever beggars. They had their hands on him smart enough. It is a pleasure to meet

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such a man as you, Inspector Addington Peace. A celebrity, by thunder, that's what I call you."

He burst out into a peal of high-pitched laughter, rocking to and fro and clutching the edge of the table with his hand. Then he bowed to us all very low and swaggered out of the room. Peace stepped out after him, and I followed at his heels.

A lamp hung in the roof of the porch, and Mr. Bulstrode stopped beneath it. In its light he looked more fierce and old and yellow than ever.

"It is no good, Mr. Bulstrode," said Addington Peace.

"Exactly; can I give you a lift?" he said quite quietly as he pointed to the car.

"It would certainly be most convenient."

Mr. Bulstrode laughed again, leering back at me over his shoulder, as if my presence afforded an added zest to his merriment. There seemed an understanding between him and the inspector. Frankly, it puzzled me.

"You do not make confidants of your assistants, Mr. Peace," he said.

The little inspector bowed.

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"At the same time," continued the old planter, "I should like to make a statement before we go. There is no necessity to warn me. I know the law."

"It is just as you like, Mr. Bulstrode."

"If I sneered at the police this evening I now make them my apologies. You have managed this business well. I still do not understand how you come to accuse me. Remember, I did not know he was dead until I received a telegram from my niece after lunch. It was rather a shock; perhaps at first I was of a mind not to confess. It would have saved me much inconvenience."

"And endangered an innocent man," said the inspector.

"Well, well, you couldn't have proved it against him, and I might have escaped. The whole affair was an accident. I had no intention even of wounding him."

"Exactly, Mr. Bulstrode—no more than the excursionist who throws out a glass bottle intends to brain the man walking by the line."

The truth was clear enough now. In some strange fashion this man had killed his brother. I stepped back a pace instinctively

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"You see," he continued, "brother William had, under circumstances of no immediate importance, appropriated my jade spear. I made up mind to get it back. I knew the hour at which he lunched, and leaving my motor in the road I walked down the avenue, hoping to find the front door open and no one about. I had a successful start. The front door was ajar. I went in, took the spear from the wall, and set off back to my car. I was some fifty yards down the drive when I heard a yell, and there was brother William tumbling out of the porch, revolver in hand.

"It startled me, for he had the most devilish of tempers; but though I was the elder man I knew I had the pace of him, and set off running. When I reached the entrance gates and looked back he was nowhere to be seen. I took it that he had thought better of it and gone back to lunch.

"I was driving the car myself, having left the chauffeur behind, as I did not wish him to know what I was about. I started up the engines, jumped into the seat, put the spear beside me, and let her go. We came round that corner at a good thirty miles an hour, and there was brother William in the road,

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waving his revolver and cursing me for a thief. He had run down through the Wilderness to cut me off.

"I give you my word I was frightened, for I knew him and his tempers. I took up the spear, and as I passed I threw it at him anyhow. Let him keep it, and be d—d to him, I thought. I wasn't going to have a hole drilled in me for any jade ever carved. I never saw what happened, for in that second I was off the road and only pulled the car straight with difficulty. The spear must have struck him end on, and I was travelling thirty miles an hour.

"My niece sent me a wire. When I received it I understood what had happened. I was in a blue funk about the business. I meant to get out of it if I could. You see I am hiding nothing. I told my man to take the chains off the motor—I had a thought for the tracks I might have left—and came back to find out how the land lay. Well, you know the rest."

"You have done yourself no harm, Mr. Bulstrode, by this confession," said Inspector Addington Peace.

"Thank you. And now, if you will jump in, I will drive you to the police-station. You

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will want to get Boyne out and put me in, eh, Inspector?"

He was still laughing in that high-pitched voice of his when the car faded into the night.

* * * *

It was not until next day that Peace gave me his explanation over our pipes in my studio. It is interesting enough to set down, if briefly.

"There were many points in the favour of Boyne," he said. "Miss Sherrick's story not only coincided with that told us by Cullen, but it also explained much that the butler considered suspicious. The young man left the drive hoping to meet Miss Sherrick. Cullen told me that Boyne asked where she was as he left, and was informed somewhere in the upper garden. He failed to find her, however, and probably concluded she had gone in to lunch. Boyne said he was walking down through the Wilderness when he heard the scream. Suppose this were a lie, then how could he have obtained the spear? Was he a man of such phenomenal strength as to use it in so deadly a fashion? You observe the difficulties.

"It was when I was upstairs examining

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the body that the idea occurred to me. The force used in throwing the spear was abnormal. Either the murderer must have been a man of remarkable physique, or he must have thrown the spear from a rapidly moving vehicle. You remember the notices that are displayed in railway-carriages begging passengers not to throw bottles from the window which will imperil the lives of plate-layers. It is not in the force of the throw but in the pace of the train that the danger lies. It was a possible parallel.

“And here I made a remarkable discovery. On closely inspecting the shaft of the spear, I found a smear of lubricating oil such as motorists use. It suggested that a man who had been lately attending to the machinery of a car had been handling the weapon. Had one of the group under possible suspicion anything to do with motors or machinery? Not one.

“I had noticed the jade collections in the hall. This spearhead was of unusual beauty. Could it have come from the colonel's own collection? He had not taken it with him when he ran towards the Wilderness, loading his revolver. Why did he so run thus armed? Had he been robbed?

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"Yet the thief had not passed that way. Cullen would have seen him if he had done so. Was the colonel endeavouring to cut him off?"

"I found the motor-tracks in the drying mud—unusual tracks, mark you, for the driver had run off the road circling the place where the colonel had stood. I traced them easily by the chain marks on the tyres. They led to the front gate, and just beyond it the car had stopped for some time close to the hedge. Lubricating oil had dripped on the road while it waited. The case was becoming plainer.

"My talk with Bulstrode's chauffeur made it self-evident. The information of Miss Sherrick and her uncle's own explanation as to his quarrel with his brother over the spear swept away my last doubt. Do you understand?"

"Yes," I said. "It seems simple now. Bulstrode has had bad luck, though. Things look black against him."

"I think he will be all right," said Addington Peace. "His story has the merit of being not only easily understandable, but true."

"And Boyne?"

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“I saw him meet Miss Sherrick. It was enough to make an old bachelor repent his ways, Mr. Phillips. Believe me, there is a great happiness of which we cannot guess—we lonely men.”

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